

TWILIGHT OF THE GODS



MARK CLAPHAM &
JON DE BURGH MILLER

TWILIGHT OF THE GODS

'OH, WHY NOT,' BENNY SAID. 'AFTER ALL, I'VE DIED BEFORE AND IT NEVER DID ME ANY HARM THEN.'

The one peaceful planet of Dellah lies in ruins. The god-like being who infest the place have lured the inhabitants into holy wars, suicide cults and genocidal pogroms. As they run out of victims, the deities plan to invade more planets - and other races are preparing pre-emptive strikes to stop them. Humankind's small sector of the galaxy is about to become the battleground of leviathans.

There is just one hope. Professor Bemice Summerfield is, surprisingly, alive and well. And she's coming home. Bernice and her friends are determined to dispose of the gods once and for all - at any cost.

T H E N E W A D V E N T U R E S

This is **MARK CLAPHAM'S** third half-novel. He lives in London, and currently inhabits the scary void between 'university' and 'career'.

JON BE BURGH MILLER has written articles for several telefantasy magazines. This is his first novel.

Cover design: Slatter-Anderson

Cover painting: **Fred Gambino**

The New Adventures is an imprint of
Virgin Publishing Ltd.

UK: £5.99 USA: \$6.95

*RECOMMENDED PRICE

Science fiction

ISBN 0 426 20536 7



9 780426 205364 >

NA

TWILIGHT OF THE GODS

T H E N E W

A D V E N T U R E S

TWILIGHT OF THE GODS

Mark Clapham

and

Jon de Burgh Miller

NA

First published in 1999 by
NA
an imprint of Virgin Publishing Ltd
Thames Wharf Studios
Rainville Road
London W6 9HA

Copyright © Mark Clapham and Jon de Burgh Miller 1999

The right of Mark Clapham and Jon de Burgh Miller to be identified as the Authors of this Work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Bernice Summerfield originally created by Paul Cornell

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

ISBN 0 426 20536 7

Cover illustration by Fred Gambino

Typeset by Galleon Typesetting, Ipswich
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham PLC

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior written consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition, including this condition, being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Dedicated to the
Bloomsbury Local Group

The authors would like to thank:

For useful character and story-related discussions:

Jonathan Blum, Simon Bucher-Jones, Paul Cornell, James Griffin, Will Howells, Matt Michael, Lawrence Miles, Dai Moriuchi, Tom Morley, Kate Orman, Lance Parkin, Justin Richards, Eddie Robson and Peter Ware.

Also thanks to Jim Sangster, Jim Smith and Tat Wood.

Jon's credits:

Thanks to my family, for years of love, support and happiness. Thanks also to everyone else who has supported me on the long road to NA authordom:

Kini Brooks-Smith, Paul Condon, Russell T Davies, Lisa Gaunt, Chad Jones, Trey Korte, Rebecca Levene, Shaun Lyon, Jac Rayner, Gareth Roberts, Kathy Sullivan, Keith Topping and all afersers, past, present and future.

Mark's credits:

In happy hellish Harrogate:

Mum, Dad, Sarah and Orlando, with special best wishes to Arthur and Joan Dracas.

The following miscellaneous people:

Natalie Baker, Rosie Hawes, Vanessa Hill, Trude Johansson, Maril Moe, Monica Piercy, Andrew Plummer, Merri Snyder, Jess Thomas and Giles Waithe.

CLOUDS ACROSS THE MOON

Irving Braxiatel stood in the desert and waited for the rains to come. A hot, dry wind swept his dark thin hair down over his face, and he brushed it out of his eyes as he stared into the night sky, umbrella rolled up in one hand. The other hand reached into the pocket of his grey linen waistcoat, produced a silver pocket watch and flicked it open with a practised motion. Braxiatel looked at the watch – only seconds to go. He replaced it in its pocket, and unfurled his umbrella, counting down the seconds. Three, two, one... right on cue, clouds began to time-lapse across the sky, a white candyfloss condensing into a thick blackness that swallowed the stars. The wind became colder and sharper, the breeze before an oncoming storm. Irving Braxiatel smiled, and raised the umbrella into his sky, as the rain began to fall for the first time in centuries. His sky, his desert, his world. He had asked for rain, and it had come. Precision weather-control systems were so pricey that most independent, moderately populated worlds couldn't afford them.

But Irving Braxiatel had more money than most governments, the money to control storms and buy planets. Born a mere lord, he had grown up to make decisions most cultures left in the lap of the gods. Braxiatel had met some gods in his time, and he didn't like them much. That sort of power was much safer in his hands than theirs. He smiled to himself as, under the cover of his umbrella, he wandered through his self-summoned cloudburst, watching the sand dampen and solidify. Nutrients, seeds and other elements had been sown by robots over the previous weeks, and over the weeks to come the rain and the sunlight would help them grow, making a barren planetoid won in a card game into a

green and pleasant land. A land fit for dreaming spires and panelled libraries, marble statues and lavish gardens. The Braxiatel Collection, a haven for all that was good, for books and art and learning. Braxiatel's own dreams made beautiful reality. A world all of his own.

Presently, he headed for the Mansionhouse, part of his replication of the Palace of Versailles. One day there would be a lake here, a summerhouse there, a Garden of Whispers... Perfection.

Braxiatel shook the rain off his umbrella as he entered the Mansionhouse by the huge main door. Fat droplets of water splashed over the marble floor.

'Bit wet out,' said Emile Mars-Smith, who was waiting for Braxiatel in the hallway.

'Yes. Novel, isn't it?' replied Braxiatel. 'I can't wait until we get to do snow.'

He hung the umbrella on a hat stand, and turned to look at his assistant. Emile had put back on a bit of the weight he had lost during his period of possession by a malignant god some time before, but had in no sense reverted to the chubby, slightly irritating boy he had once been. His experience had left him noticeably older - a little old beyond his years, in fact - and with a kind of confidence about him. It was as if nothing life could throw at him could compare to the horrors he had already endured, which in his case was probably a fair enough assessment. Braxiatel recognized potential when he saw it, and snapped up this new-model Emile for his organization as soon as he had come out of convalescence. As Irving Braxiatel made an increasing presence on the galactic stage, Emile was the man who kept things running, organizing appointments and passing on messages.

'So, when do I leave?' asked Braxiatel.

'They reckon the conference will take place within the next month,' Emile replied. 'Plenty of time for you to brief whoever you send into the Dellahan situation, but not long enough for you to actually go with them. The negotiation team want you

to be on standby to get over to Vremnya as soon as the generals give the go-ahead.'

'Perfect,' said Braxiatel. 'That gives me a week or so to watch my new grass grow.'

The conference in question was intended to broker a peace deal on the planet Vremnya, a world with complex cultural divisions which had recently collapsed into bitter war. Vremnya's shaky civilization had been pushed over the edge by the outbreaks of religious wars that had plagued the sector ever since a group of so-called 'gods' took over the once peaceful planet of Dellah. Braxiatel had lived on Dellah, had been there when the fanatics took over, and would not see Vremnya fall that far. If he had to go there in person, use his power and money to get a settlement, then so be it. In the meantime there was the question of Dellah itself. But then that was all in hand.

'How is the prepping of the ship going?' he asked Emile.

'Fine,' said Emile. 'The Berkeley team who put it together in the first place sent detailed instructions, and they call about twenty times a day warning us about this and that. They're obsessed with the idea we might break their new toy, or cause some kind of dimensional rupture.'

'Well, let's just say I'm glad I don't have to pilot the thing,' said Braxiatel. 'Speaking of which, which of our friends elected to join this mission?'

Emile punched buttons on a palmtop organizer.

'Apparently Benny, Chris and Clarence agreed as soon as they were contacted,' read Emile. 'That boring mercenary guy sent us an obscene reply, and has refused our calls ever since, but I don't think anyone's going to be too bothered that *he's* not around. Jason Kane procrastinated as usual, but eventually agreed.' He switched off the little computer. 'Well, four out of five isn't bad.'

Chris Cwej and the artificially constructed, angel-shaped being known as Clarence had been in the same star system when the call came, and so had ended up travelling together. They had chartered a modest but expensive long-haul ship

with enough on-board AI to cope with most of the journey unaided. This had allowed the two passengers to retire to the vid lounge for most of the journey, where they could relax and continue Clarence's education in the ways of human culture.

Chris Cwej, former Adjudicator and sometime agent of higher powers, had once been tall, blond and handsome. After a particularly radical bit of reconstruction he was now short and broad with receding, dark hair. Once he would have devoured junk food by the tonne, but the demands of his new body denied him this luxury. He sat in an armchair, half-heartedly eating muesli yoghurt while jealously admiring his companion's pizza.

Clarence bit into the hot pizza appreciatively. While eating was not a strict necessity for him - Clarence being an artificial construct housing the crippled intelligence of a defunct sentient spaceship - he was trying to experience life as a human whenever possible. The creation of a race of super-advanced beings - rivals of Chris's former employers - Clarence was trying to distance himself from those lofty heights.

Besides, pizza tasted nice.

In an effort to make his angelic form less conspicuous, Clarence had recently obtained a red cloak large enough to cover his wings when necessary. With the threat of a return to Dellah he had also reluctantly invested in a weapon: a golden sword which hung from his belt. If nothing else, it scared the hell out of most people.

Munching away, the Adjudicator and the angel watched the vidscreen. Chris had assured Clarence that what they were watching was a fiction, a fantasy of the wildest kind. But it all seemed rather obvious and predictable to Clarence.

'How long did this show run for?' he asked Chris.

Chris frowned. 'About thirty-odd years, I think.'

'And is it all like this? Just people being captured and escaping, a lot of running around and an explosion at the end?'

'Pretty much. Why do you ask?'

Clarence shrugged. 'Just wondered if they ever did anything interesting, that's all.'

Chris shook his head. 'Not really. But it's better than watching cookery shows.'

'S'pose,' agreed Clarence. 'Cookery shows suck.'

Chris laughed. 'Too right. You know what?'

'What?'

'You're starting to sound like a regular guy. Welcome to the land of the only partially extraordinary.'

'Yes,' agreed Clarence smugly. 'I suppose I'm getting used to this.' Watching stupid vid shows, eating pizza; it wasn't as if he was just going through the motions of it all: he was living it, being part of the everyday world. He would always be unique, one of a kind, but at least he no longer felt alone. He slumped in his chair, took another bite of pizza. At last, he thought happily, he had got himself a life.

The cargo vessel *Nervous Norvin* was already on its way to KS-159, carrying enough equipment to build a small town. Which was exactly the point. Braxiatel was paying the sort of fees that very rich and careful people pay to keep their valuables intact in transit, so the captain could hardly refuse a polite request to carry a passenger too.

So Professor Bernice Summerfield, former holder of the Edward Watkinson Chair at St Oscar's University on Dellah, found herself quartered in the pleasant, functional crew area of the ship. She spent much of the uneventful trip doing crossword puzzles and other intelligence tests, a form of mental physiotherapy intended to help her recovery from a recent brain condition. She spent the rest of the time listening to music, doodling in her diary and generally mooching around.

It was while wandering back and forth in her small cabin, tunelessly singing along to the Foundations, that she caught a glance of something disturbing in the mirror above her wash basin. She hastily lunged over to switch on the shaving light.

A flick of silver hair was emerging in her fringe. It was building into a streak. She was turning into a badger. She had occasionally found the odd grey hair over the previous few years, but this was the first sustained burst of greyness she had suffered. Of course, she had been through a lot of stress recently - the destruction of St Oscar's, her almost terminal illness, the loss of her memories - which could explain the sudden streak of steel in her otherwise youthfully dark hair. But premature ageing was ageing nonetheless, in spite of the unusual cause. First buying that coat, now *this*.

She looked closer at her face under the harsh neon. Her skin seemed pale and transparent, like old parchment. She'd been punched in the face, whacked on the head, thrown through windows and generally had the crap kicked out of her over the last few years, so her whole face was covered in the kind of small nicks and scars that had hardly seemed worth the regen on their own, but had certainly managed to mount up. Exposure to extreme weather and hostile environments, often with days or weeks between moisturizing, had left her with a weathered and blotchy complexion. Constant tension had caused fine lines and wrinkles to cut through her already abused skin.

'I need a face mask,' she told her reflection. 'One I can wear for a decade or two.'

Another ship headed for KS-159, this time from the Proximan Chain. A slim vessel with no life support, it moved at a speed that would shake most living organisms apart. This ship was also on autopilot, but with an AI fixed in place with masking tape, a battered paperback stuffed underneath to keep it upright. Once this vessel had broken through the atmosphere of KS-159 it would break up, letting its cargo float down to the desert surface on a parachute.

That cargo was a suspended-animation lifepod containing a scruffy humanoid of dubious habits. In a deep cryogenic sleep, Jason Kane, ex-husband of Bernice Summerfield and the galaxy's premier author of xenophiliac pornography, happily dreamt of electric gerbils.

Benny stood at the top of the ship's loading ramp, breathing the air of KS-159. Crate-carrying robots zigzagged around her, unloading the ship's cargo. There was a tang of moisture in the air, presumably a result of Brax's terraforming project. Other evidence of his great schemes was clear to see: prefabricated warehouses dotted the landscape, and scaffolding showed where more permanent structures were beginning to sprout. As she admired the landscape, a small skimmer jerked to a halt at the bottom of the loading ramp, and a familiar figure leapt out. He wore khakis and boots, and strode up the ramp in a businesslike manner, which Benny found rather surprising.

'Hi, Benny,' said Emile, giving her a hug. Benny always remembered him as the least tactile of people, and was stunned by how self-assured he seemed, how comfortable within himself.

'Emile!' she replied in shock, eagerly hugging him back. 'You look so grown up. What happened to you?'

'What, apart from an alien parasite in the brain?' replied Emile, pointing his fingers at his head like a gun, rolling his eyes and sticking his tongue out. 'But then, you know what *that's* like.'

'Don't I just!' said Benny. 'So, where's Brax? I thought he was going to meet me in person, the stuffy sod.'

'Helping to dig Jason out of a sand dune, I'm afraid,' said Emile, helping Benny load her bags into the skimmer. 'Chris and Clarence are out there too.'

'They're better people than me, then,' said Benny. 'I'd be tempted to bury him deeper.'

The site of Jason's crash-landing was not far from the Mansionhouse, so Emile took Benny's bags and left her to make her own way back. The sun was setting as Benny walked across the dunes, and she was inescapably reminded of archaeological digs she had been on before. She saw a familiar, rake-thin figure in a grey suit directing the actions of two other men, one of whom had wings. Oddly, while

Benny had long since accustomed herself to Clarence being an angel, she still hadn't got used to Chris being a dark-haired fat guy. Chris and Clarence were busy shovelling sand away from a partially submerged atmosphere capsule, while Braxiatel looked on. Although outsiders might mistake this for laziness, Benny just knew that Braxiatel had no practical skills at all. He would probably end up knocking himself out with the shovel.

'Good team you've got there,' said Benny. 'If I ever get around to buying a house, then I'll borrow them to do the garden.'

'Thanks for that,' said Chris, deadpan.

'It will be a pleasure,' said Clarence, who clearly hadn't realized Benny was joking.

Her, have a house, settle down? That wasn't the kind of decision, the kind of commitment, she was willing to make just yet. She was still young, in spite of hair colour to the contrary.

'How are you, Benny?' asked Braxiatel. 'How did the job hunting go?'

Benny pulled a face. 'Horrid. No one wants an archaeology professor whose last university was razed to the ground. For some reason they think this constitutes bad luck.' She decided to change the subject. 'So, what happened to my useless ex? Your security do the decent thing and blast him out of the sky?'

'Not quite,' said Braxiatel. 'He came out of suspension to find his internal systems crashed. We have -' he flipped open a pocket watch and checked it '- a couple of hours to open this can up before there's any serious threat to his life. Ninety minutes if we want to avoid brain damage. I'm reckoning we'll get him out in, oh, about six minutes' time.'

'Brain damage?' said Benny. 'Bit late to worry about that.' Damn Jason. Although they had plenty of time to get him out, and they had been in far more potentially lethal situations in the past, it would be just like him to die in a really dumb way like this, killed by buying a cheap second-hand spaceship. Besides, Jason wasn't allowed to die: he

would leave such a gap in her life. Apart from anything else, who would she have to prove wrong?

‘Hatch clear,’ said Chris, and he and Clarence stepped out of the way.

‘Shall we?’ said Braxiatel, gesturing for Bernice to take a look. Together, they dropped into the space their friends had cleared around the capsule’s hatch.

‘Numeric keypad,’ said Braxiatel, brushing dust away with a pale silk hankie. ‘Accessible by a four-figure code. We don’t have the time to go through all the possibilities, and I left my decrypting kit on Dellah.’ He turned to Benny. ‘Any ideas?’

‘Just one,’ said Benny, pushing past Braxiatel to get to the keypad. She made a silent prayer that Jason was still as predictable, as juvenile and as crass as ever. Judging by his latest book there was little chance that had changed. She tapped in a six, a nine, another six and another nine. Braxiatel raised an eyebrow. ‘My husband has a very lowbrow sense of humour,’ she said apologetically.

To their relief the hatch clicked open with a hydraulic hiss, and in a cloud of cryogenic gas Jason Kane pushed his way out, falling into the sand in a coughing, spluttering mess. Even in the rapidly fading dusk light, he squinted myopically.

‘Buried alive,’ croaked Jason. He raised a hand limply, as if he could barely raise his voice, and wanted to make a moving last request. Benny leant forward, straining to hear. ‘Buried, choking, darkness,’ he muttered, barely audible. ‘Bit like... our marriage.’

As Jason burst into a fit of coughing laughter, Benny stood up and kicked him hard.

‘Bastard,’ she said. ‘Last time I save your life,’ she added.

Braxiatel was busy examining the capsule. ‘This must be an antique,’ he said. ‘How long have you had it?’

‘About a week,’ said Jason, pulling himself up. ‘It was all I could get through my channels. The Proximan Chain isn’t the most salubrious of places, and they ask so many questions if you buy over the counter.’

‘Questions you don’t want to answer,’ said Benny wearily, rolling her eyes. ‘Whatever, Jason, whatever.’ She turned to

her friends. 'Shall we wait for him to work up the energy to walk back, or shall we just get your little friends to drag him?'

Braxiatel, Chris, Clarence, Jason and Benny returned to the main house, updating each other on the events of the last few weeks. It seemed that their attempts to go out and find themselves, to spend some quality time on their own, had all proved fairly boring. Apart from Braxiatel, who had managed to do a staggering number of improbable things since they had last all been together.

When they arrived back at the house Clarence and Chris led the way, heading directly for the kitchen. They quickly raided the place for cornflakes and milk.

'Bit late in the day for that, isn't it?' said Benny, looking out of the window into the early-evening shade.

'Space lag,' said Clarence. 'Our body clocks are wrong thanks to Chris "temporal genius" Cwej here miscalculating what time it would be when we got here.'

Chris raised his hands in a 'So, sue me!' gesture, his mouth too full of cereal to speak.

'Getting bolshy in his old age, isn't he?' said Benny, indicating Clarence.

Chris gave an apologetic shrug, indicating this was his fault as well.

'Chris has taught me the key to humanity,' said Clarence smugly.

'Love?' suggested Benny hopefully.

'No, sarcasm,' replied Clarence.

'Even better,' enthused Benny. 'Something I really understand.'

While they had been bitching, Braxiatel had been fussing over the work surface, and had produced a large pot of coffee in a ridiculously short time. He neatly set mugs out for everyone, and poured. Coffee in hand, they then sat around the table in a difficult silence. Benny was fascinated, watching Braxiatel put his friends at their ease with coffee and biscuits, ever the perfect host. That was part of the

reason the rest of them had opted to leave KS-159 for a while: Braxiatel's dream planet was just *too* nice, too perfect. It was easy to spend weeks on end doing very little, every day a Sunday afternoon. Their departure had been an attempt to break with routine, Jason pursuing his business interests, Benny chasing a job, Clarence trying to lead a human life and Chris... pursuing whatever agenda Chris pursued these days.

'So, why are we here?' Jason said suddenly. 'I left important business to come here.'

'Subtle and selfless as ever, I see,' said Benny acidly.

'Well, if we waited for you to finish analysing everyone's body posture, speech patterns, eyebrow movements, use of the word "custard" and so on we'd be here for hours before we got to the bloody point.'

'Good God!' exclaimed Braxiatel, turning to Chris and Clarence. 'I'd forgotten they were always like this. Please, pay attention!'

Benny and Jason, suitably chastened, lapsed back into silently glaring at each other.

'I believe Jason asked a question,' said Braxiatel patiently. 'One I never got a chance to answer.'

Benny and Jason shuffled in their seats, embarrassed, but they stayed quiet.

'Thank you,' said Braxiatel. 'Jason asked why you were all here. Well, as you can probably guess, I, in association with some people on Earth, have found a solution to the Dellah problem. It isn't nice and it isn't going to be easy, but it could save humanity from being trapped in the middle of a war between your lot -' he pointed to Chris '- your lot -' he pointed to Clarence '- and the gods, a war that would result in the sterilization of this sector.'

Benny opened her mouth, but Braxiatel silenced her with a glance.

'That solution is something that will be explained to you tomorrow, after you're all rested and ready to learn. For now, though, I'll explain the current situation on Dellah, as far as

my sources can ascertain. It seems there has been a certain amount of conflict among the gods...'

THE LAND OF THE GODS

The Devoted had been waiting for seven days and seven nights. They had been waiting through seven storms, and seven of them had died of hunger. But still they waited. Because when a person believes in something with all their heart, with all their soul, and with all their being, then the waiting becomes part of the experience. The experience of belonging. The Devoted had fled the land of the heathen, where the vengeful deities had begun unjustly punishing their faithful children. They had trekked for weeks and weeks, until finally they had found a place where they could rest, recuperate, and prepare to retake their homeland. It was one of the most peaceful places on Dellah, a holy area known as the Valley of the Defeated. Apparently a great war had once been fought there, but that was long ago. As soon as the Children of Maa'lon had arrived at the place, they had renamed it the Valley of the Devoted. They swore that there would never again be fighting on such sacred ground. It was an oath that would prove difficult to keep.

Cepachi San, a recent convert to the Children of Maa'lon, had been placed on guard at a ridge that overlooked most of the valley and the paths leading towards it. Cepachi stared down the path leading from the ridge to the settlement, and wondered how much longer they would be able to enjoy the peace. It had been a week now since they had arrived at the valley. A week since everyone had been able to relax for the first time in ages. It had also been a week since Maa'lon had left His Children on their own. The One True God had ordered them to stay at the camp until He returned from eliminating the infidel army that had been spotted across the valley, an army that threatened the peaceful existence His

Children enjoyed. The weather had been harsh, and food supplies were scarce, but the Children had stayed because that was what was expected of them. They were obedient, but that did not stop them feeling uneasy at His absence. As Cepachi stared into the icy mist, he could not help straining his eyes, just in case he might spot the distant figure of his god returning.

If there was one thing that being with Maa'lon had taught the Children, it was that it was at all times necessary to keep up their faith. And this they did with vigour. They had fasted and prayed regularly since His departure, but Maa'lon had still not returned. Maa'lon had told them that He would return within two days, and, although it was blasphemous to entertain such a thought, Cepachi could not help fearing that something terrible had happened to the god. He cursed himself for being so unfaithful, and swore that he would never reveal his blasphemy to the others. The other Children had little respect for him as it was, what with his being the youngest soldier in Maa'lon's army - barely an adult by most people's standards - and there was no way he was going to let them string him up for disobedience. Nevertheless, he could not shake the feeling that perhaps someone should go out and look for Maa'lon, just to make sure He had not been harmed by any of the infidel.

The young man shivered as a cold breeze slinked through his hair. In the daytime, the sandy valley teemed with plant life and was baked in the rays of the sun, but during the night an icy cold front swept over the area. Cepachi said a quick prayer to Maa'lon, apologizing for his blasphemy, and asked the god to return to them soon.

Cepachi's meditation was interrupted by the noise of footsteps trudging through the brittle grass behind him. He turned round and held his torch up into the night.

'Hello?' he asked, calling into the darkness.

'Good evening, Cepachi San,' said a familiar, fatherly voice.

Cepachi breathed easily once more, and smiled. 'Reverend Harker! What brings you out here at this time of night?'

Harker was known for his rigid sleep patterns, and to see him walking around at such an unsociable hour disturbed Cepachi slightly. There had to be a reason for the Reverend's appearance. Could it be that he had heard some news from the Messiah? Could it be that Maa'lon had returned? Cepachi wondered (although this was probably too much to ask) if these endless nights of standing all alone, out in the cold and dark, were finally at an end. While all the Children of Maa'lon loved and worshipped their god with all their being, they all acknowledged that there was a need for one disciple to bridge the gap between god and man. Without a doubt, anyone who had ever been near him knew that James Harker was the one for the job. He had spent his life studying the holy texts, and it was the Reverend who had first accurately prophesied the date of Maa'lon's return. For some unknown reason, the Reverend had a natural charisma that made people listen to what he said. If the Reverend, a fellow Dellahan, could understand and embrace Maa'lon's teachings so perfectly, then it was clear to the rest of them that one day they too might reach his level. In short, the Reverend was the example that kept the Children of Maa'lon going through the darkest of times. He was the father who helped them understand their god.

'My dear Cepachi,' the Reverend said soothingly, 'you have made Maa'lon proud with your vigil. I wanted to come out and see for myself how patient, how dedicated, you have been this past week.'

Cepachi nodded. There was an uncomfortable silence before Cepachi worked up the courage to ask his mentor the question he wanted answered. 'Have you heard from Maa'lon, sir?'

Reverend Harker looked at Cepachi with an air of sadness in his eyes, then knelt down on the ground and stared out across the valley. He paused, breathing heavily, as if unsure what to say. 'My child, Maa'lon will return very soon. Something tells me that this has been the great test of our faith He mentions so often. Do you remember Maa'lon's Sermon from the University?'

Cepachi nodded his head. "Prepare for the day of reckoning," he told us. I remember it well. "Prepare for the day when we will all be judged." Are you saying Maa'lon was referring to this week?'

The Reverend looked at Cepachi and smiled. 'You understand. He will return soon, I am sure of it, and you will be rewarded for your vigil. You may have been part of our flock for only six months, but you have proved beyond all doubt that you are truly one of us.'

Cepachi was unable to stop a grin from spreading across his face. 'Thank you. Reverend. That means a great deal to me.' In a few words, the Reverend had summed up exactly why Cepachi's life was so much better as a follower of Maa'lon. If you were a follower, then whatever your age, strength, appearance or personality, your peers and neighbours welcomed you. During his childhood, Cepachi had never felt like he belonged anywhere. He had never felt normal. He had never fitted in with the wishes of society. But things were different now. There was something about getting the chance to listen to the wisdom of one's god at first hand, to hear all those parables that he had been read as a baby retold by the voice that originally told them to the prophets, that made Cepachi sure that as long as he kept up his faith, he would never be alone again.

The Reverend had spread his arms out, had closed his eyes, and seemed to be revelling in the biting wind that made the vigil so uncomfortable for Cepachi.

'It really is beautiful up here,' the Reverend said. 'You are very lucky, Cepachi San.'

Cepachi felt unsure how to react to this. If anyone else had said this, Cepachi would probably have looked skyward and tutted, but to do such a thing in front of Reverend Harker would be sacrilegious. Besides, if the Reverend said he thought that Cepachi was lucky, then he meant it.

'If you like,' he said, failing miserably to prevent himself sounding pathetic, 'you could come and meditate here. I'd appreciate the company.'

The Reverend gently opened his eyes, looked up at Cepachi and smiled. 'Thank you, child. I will do that, someday soon.'

He stood up, brushed the dust off his knees, and placed a hand tenderly on Cepachi's right shoulder. 'Alas, I have other matters to deal with before then.'

Cepachi nodded. 'I appreciate the time you've already given to me, Reverend.'

'It is always a pleasure, Cepachi San.'

The Reverend released his grip on Cepachi's shoulder, turned around, then wandered away in the direction of the settlement.

Cepachi watched his silhouette getting further away, until it was no longer visible.

Cepachi sighed, picked up a pair of binoculars, and stared out into the valley, out towards the infidels' camp. For some reason, returning to his duty seemed more of a pleasure than a chore now, and even the cold wind felt refreshing rather than uncomfortable. Guarding the camp may be the most boring job in the world, but at least he had been given something interesting to think about.

An hour later, Cepachi's mind was still buzzing with the inspirational words the Reverend had uttered, and his usual 5 a.m. tiredness had been replaced by a level of excitement that he had not felt in ages. So far tonight had been more eventful than most evenings, and so Cepachi did not expect anything else interesting to occur. When it did, it would be an understatement to say that he was surprised. He had been busy scanning the area for signs of trouble when he had spotted an unfamiliar bright light in the distance. Even through his binoculars, Cepachi had been unable to make out what the source of the light was, but it was clearly heading towards the camp. Cepachi put his binoculars down and rubbed his eyes to wake them up. Who would be coming to the camp at this early hour? Surely if anyone was planning on attacking the camp they would have done so earlier in the night, when they would have been aided by the cover of darkness. This simple military logic comforted

Cepachi that the light was not that of an attacker. If it was not the enemy, though, who was it? Cepachi wondered if his mind had been playing tricks on him. He took up his binoculars once more and stared through them. The light burned brightly, then mysteriously disappeared from view.

Suddenly his vision was filled with a red, swirling mass. Cepachi panicked. Something was right in front of him. He dropped the binoculars and screamed when he saw what it was.

The creature was a terrible beast. Walking on four clawed feet, it was the colour of blood, and all across the surface of its body ran a series of horrible pulsating arteries. Its head consisted of two large insect-like eyes and was surrounded by a ring of flame. It was as if the creature were eternally on fire. It was a living nightmare.

The demon roared, and Cepachi stumbled backwards, falling to the floor. The creature leapt towards the ground where Cepachi had fallen, and the young guard rolled quickly out of the way. He tried to get to his feet but the creature was too quick. In a few seconds, it was on top of Cepachi, pinning him to the ground with its sharp claws, Cepachi stared up into the blood-red eyes of the beast. He had never felt so scared in his life. The creature's breath smelt of burning flesh, and Cepachi felt as if he were staring at death itself. Tears began to roll down his cheeks as he realized that he was nowhere near as brave as he had believed himself to be.

'What are you?' Cepachi wheezed.

A smile appeared to cross the demon's double rows of razor-sharp teeth. When it spoke, it was as if the creature had swallowed thunder.

'I am a god,' it said.

Well, the thing could talk. There may be some way Cepachi could reason with it. It was not as if meeting a god was a rare occurrence nowadays. Cepachi prayed it was one of the more peaceful deities, but judging by the thing's appearance he doubted it.

'Which god are you?' Cepachi shouted.

The creature chuckled. 'Oh, I don't know. What do you want to call me? I have had so many names. The Horned Beast, the Liege Maximo, the Child of the Flame, Urgmundasatra, the Eater of Souls, Satan, Hemulin, Dahak, Clantabal... I'm very flexible in that department.'

Cepachi felt his throat dry and found he was struggling with his words. 'I... I'm not sure I recognize those names.'

The demon let out a sighing noise. 'How about Tehke then? Some guy I killed in Tashwari called me that, so I guess that's what you people call me around here. I kinda like the name too. What do you think?'

Tehke. Cepachi wondered whether he meant Tehke of Anapalas. The Burning One. Could this creature really be the legendary outcast of the gods? Had the devil himself really returned?

'What do you want from me?' Cepachi asked. He could hear how pathetic and whiny his voice sounded, but under the circumstances was unable to keep composed. 'I'll do anything you ask of me, just let me live.'

Tehke ran his snout along Cepachi's body, as if he were trying to read his scent.

'You,' the demon said, 'you already follow a god, don't you?'

'I... I do?'

The demon continued to sniff the guard, as if trying to interpret all the information it could get from his scent.

'Yeah, you're...' The demon paused and moved his head until his face was only a few centimetres from Cepachi's. 'You're of Maa'lon.'

Cepachi nodded rapidly. 'Yes, my god Maa'lon. You know of Him?'

The demon flung his head back and let out a terrifying laugh. 'You could say that. You people amuse me, you know that?'

Cepachi tried to nod and force a smile. 'What do you want from me?' he asked.

Tehke thrust a claw forward and dragged it lightly across Cepachi's forehead. 'You,' the demon said, 'will be my new servant.'

There was little Cepachi could do to protest about this statement.

Tehke pointed to a distant mountain.

‘Look over there, Cepachi San,’ he said. ‘Tell me what you see.’

Cepachi squinted in the dim light to see what Tehke could be referring to. ‘It’s... it’s a mountain. And?’

Tehke nodded. ‘A mountain.’

A ripple of energy shot from Tehke’s arm, moving faster than anything Cepachi had ever seen. It spiralled across the valley, fading into the distance.

Suddenly a great rumbling noise filled the valley.

‘Now, Cepachi San. What do you see now?’

Cepachi couldn’t believe what he was seeing. The mountain appeared to be growing, reaching higher and higher into the sky.

No, he realized. It wasn’t growing, it was flying. Tehke had ripped the mountain out of the ground and lifted it into the air.

‘And now for a little craft lesson,’ said Tehke. Cepachi glanced back at the god, registered a wicked smile on his face, then turned back to watch the spectacle.

The mountain was changing shape, shifting around in the air like clay being moulded by invisible hands.

Cepachi suddenly realized that the mountain was rapidly getting closer. Tehke was bringing the mountain to himself. As it got closer, Cepachi could see what Tehke had been sculpting. The giant mountain had been transformed into a giant statue of Tehke himself.

The god threw his head back and laughed. ‘I just rock, don’t I?’

Cepachi suddenly realized that the demon statue - the former mountain - was moving, almost as if alive.

The statue appeared to change course slightly. Now it wasn’t heading for Tehke and Cepachi, but was moving towards the distant encampment of the Followers of Moht. In moments the statue had cast a giant shadow over their camp. Cepachi was too far away to see anything clearly, but

his mind filled with images of people screaming as they saw the monster statue overhead.

The statue moved to the ground, and began trampling on the camp, bolts of fire spewing out of its mouth.

‘Lord...’ Cepachi said. ‘I know they’re infidel, but...’

‘You understand now, don’t you, Cepachi? You realize why there’s no future but me.’

Cepachi nodded. ‘You are indeed the one true god.’

Tehke chuckled. ‘Damn right. And you, Cepachi, will be my number-one follower. I like you, kid. You’ll go far.’

There was a rumbling noise as the statue was lifted into the air, and Cepachi was sure he could hear a distant roar, a roar that screamed at its master for not letting the behemoth finish its job. The statue started to melt back into the shape of a mountain, and quickly returned to its original location. It was like watching the last couple of minutes in reverse. Soon, the mountain was back where it had always been. It was as though it had never moved.

‘I was thinking,’ Tehke said, ‘that you peasants might find a bipedal form somewhat easier to relate to.’

Cepachi watched in horror as a white glow began to emanate from the demon’s skin. The creature moved away slightly, and his skin appeared to ripple, moving in and out of place. Its entire form seemed to be altering. The creature was changing its shape.

* * *

Reverend Harker sat in his tent, meditating on the future.

‘My Lord Maa’lon,’ he prayed. ‘Your people are restless. Please give me insight to your wishes. I must know what you want me to teach them.’

‘Reverend Harker?’ said a muffled voice from outside the tent. ‘Are you in there?’ Harker snapped his eyes open and jumped up. Who would dare to disturb his meditation? He had told his people hundreds of times that he was never to be disturbed at this time. He had even persuaded Maa’lon to make it blasphemous to interrupt the Reverend. Whoever it was who had been rude enough to interrupt would surely be punished.

Harker walked over to the door of the tent and ripped it open. Standing in the doorway was the familiar shape of Cepachi San. 'What?' he shouted at the young guard. 'What is it?'

'Er, sir?' said Cepachi. 'We have a visitor.'

Cepachi stepped aside to reveal a sight that made the Reverend feel ill. The man standing behind Cepachi had bright-red skin, covered in veins and blisters. His face looked like that of a bum's victim, and his head was surrounded by a circle of flame. The man's eyes were jet-black and his hair seemed to be burning and regrowing every second.

'Good morning, Reverend,' said the man, as he stepped forward. 'I am the only god you need ever worship. The one you people call Tehke. You may have heard of me.'

Harker nodded. 'You are the highest member of the Pantheon.' That's it, Harker thought, keep your composure. Maa'lon will protect you from any harm.

'You and all the people here will bow to me now,' Tehke announced. 'You shall enjoy a new religion.'

Harker shook his head. 'No. I don't mean any disrespect by this, but you see, we already have a god. We are the Devoted. The Children of Maa'lon.'

Tehke grinned. 'Oh really? I don't see this Maa'lon anywhere.'

Harker gritted his teeth. This was a chilling moment, but was undoubtedly an example of how his faith would be tested in the coming months.

'Maa'lon is away,' Harker announced, as he had done so many times over the past week. 'He is away fighting the infidel. But he will return. He will return soon, I am sure of it.'

Tehke let out a long laugh that made Harker's blood freeze. 'I wouldn't count on it,' the god said.

Tehke reached behind him, and for the first time Harker noticed a large bulge on the god's back. Tehke paused, then thrust his hand into the bulge, slicing straight through skin and bone, without apparently feeling a thing. Tehke

rummaged around inside his back, then pulled his hand out. Harker saw that Tehke had removed a large, round object.

‘What is it?’ Harker asked, although he feared he knew the answer already. Tehke held up the object for Harker to see clearly. The Reverend felt sick and staggered backwards.

Although the hair was matted with blood and the face was covered in cuts, it was easily recognizable as the head of Maa’lon.

Harker felt tears swelling in his eyes. ‘What... what have you done?’ he cried.

‘I met your god several days ago. We had a fight, a bit of a tussle, but at the end of the day...’ Tehke paused, as if looking for the right words to say. ‘Well, let’s just say he wasn’t exactly a match for my skills.’

‘But, but you’re a god,’ Harker said.

‘Whoa,’ Tehke said sarcastically. ‘Give that man a medal for his powers of observation.’

‘But... but the gods don’t kill each other. The Pantheon mists in a state of harmony.’

Tehke sighed. ‘Yeah, well, that was yesterday.’ He waved an arm up towards the sky. ‘This “blockade” that has been placed around the planet is hindering the spread of our gospels. To be honest, there just isn’t enough faith to go mound any more.’

Harker was beginning to understand what was going on, despite the horror of the situation. ‘So you killed Maa’lon to take his followers?’

Tehke nodded. ‘Survival of the fittest. And that would be me.’

Harker looked into the god’s demonic eyes, and as he did so felt a terrible wave of grief overcome his soul. ‘How many gods have you killed?’ he asked the demon.

Tehke held out a hand as if counting on his fingers. ‘Oh, about five,’ he said. ‘But there will be many more.’

Tehke grabbed Harker’s arm and held it up towards the heavens. ‘Maa’lon is dead, James. You have to understand that he wasn’t worthy. I am your new god, now. You will

instruct all my children to bow to me from this time on. I will protect you all.'

Harker nodded, and took back his hand. This creature was terrifying, but he had killed Maa'lon, and thus was clearly more powerful than Harker's former master. Despite his appearance, Harker somehow felt that he could trust this god, and suddenly he was clear in his mind what he had to do. Tehke would protect them from harm. Tehke would do exactly as Maa'lon had done. Tehke would be a worthy god to follow.

Harker stepped out into the sunlight and moved over to where a fearful-looking Cepachi San stood.

'Fetch my robes and gather the Children together,' he told the young man. 'I have an announcement to make.'

Half a continent away, the province of Tashwari was baked in the heat of another glorious day. From her viewpoint in the West Tower of the Royal Palace, Palma Tabaa watched as a group of ducks basked in the sunlight that rippled off the surface of the lake surrounding the building. The peaceful scene contrasted sharply with what Palma saw in the street beyond the lake. A group of Pathetics, the poorer people of Tashwari, were arguing among themselves as they stood in the morning queue for access to the city's main water well. Palma felt an overwhelming sense of respect for these people. Shunned by so many, willing to put themselves through great hardship, and all because they refused to betray their moral principles and bow to a false idol. After the Sultan had declared that it was illegal not to have a religion, it had not been long before almost everyone on the planet had been converted to some hokum of a belief system or other. What was once a private matter, relevant to no one but the individual, had now been brought into the public arena. What was strange was that very few people seemed to voice any objections to the decree. Palma herself had woken one morning, almost a year ago, to be confronted with the realization that the writings of Jerr'm made total sense, and had decided that she should live by his teachings.

The Pathetics, however, were people who had never felt the need to adopt the teachings of one of the gods, and as a consequence they had been punished for this sin. Their homes and possessions had been confiscated and they had been banished to the industrial grounds underneath the province. The life they now endured was horrendous, but at least they were free to express themselves without the involvement of the authorities.

Palma had failed to understand why the Pathetics were acting this way. Ever since she had begun worshipping Jerr'm her life had seemed so much better. Why were these people refusing happiness? All they had to do was declare their faith in one of the higher Pantheon, the six great gods of Dellah, and they would have all their property, possessions, food and facilities restored. Then, one night three months ago, when she had been away on an errand outside the palace, something had made her suddenly change her mind about her beliefs. She had woken from a dream in which a wave of light had swept over her body, cleansing her soul and clearing her mind. She remembered reaching out of her bed to pick up her copy of Jerr'm's teachings, in an effort to find a comforting passage. No matter how hard she tried, none of the book seemed to make sense any more. It was as if she had suddenly lost the will to believe. Over the next few days, she felt as if a great weight had been lifted from her back, and she came to realize just how terrible the gods' control of Dellah was.

Palma was only seventeen years old, and was nowhere near powerful or clever enough to do anything to stop the gods. Despite her change of heart, she had been forced to continue as before. She still attended the Jerr'm worship services, and still worked as a handmaiden to the Sultan. There seemed to be little else that she could do in the situation. As the weeks drew on, Palma came to realize that while she had been a servant of Jerr'm she had been oblivious to many of the goings on in the province, and soon she discovered the presence of a resistance movement. It seems she was not the only one whose faith had suddenly been shattered. Only the

fit, healthy and headstrong were willing to join the resistance. The other unbelievers, like the Pathetics, simply had to endure the hardships that the gods imposed on them.

Palma watched as a member of the New Moral Army, the Sultan's personal police force, marched in and started throwing his weight around, picking on the innocent Pathetics as they queued. Palma hoped that they could be strong for just a few more days. The resistance was making progress and if all went to plan the gods' support network should be eradicated very soon.

Palma checked her watch. She moved away from the window, picked up her satchel, and made her way down into the palace basement. She had a date with the future.

Fifteen minutes later, Palma was feeling her way through the dark tunnels that led from the basement of the palace to a nearby hillside. The tunnels had once been used as an emergency bunker for the Royal Family but had fallen into disuse a long time ago. Since the gods had taken control, searches were performed on those entering and leaving the palace by legitimate means - searches Palma needed to avoid. Somehow they had also erected a mental barrier around the palace, ensuring that the belief of those within the palace continued to be reinforced every day. But those whose belief had been shattered - who had been touched by the wave of disbelief that had spread across Dellah that night - were immune even to the reinforced influence within the barrier. Tightening up security like that had only served to prove to the resistance that the details of the gods' plans, and any possible weaknesses they may have, lay inside the palace. Ever since her faith in the gods had disappeared, Palma had done her very best to help the resistance move information in and out of the palace. Everyone else had apparently forgotten about the existence of the underground tunnels, and thus they provided a perfect way to link the non-believers inside the palace with the outside world.

Eventually she arrived at the thick metal wall that marked the end of the tunnel. She fumbled for a handle set into the

wall, and turned it. A loud grinding sound came from behind the metal as ancient gears turned, moving the wall away to reveal the outside world behind it. Light streamed into the tunnel and it took several seconds for Palma's eyes to adjust to the sudden brightness.

She walked out into the sun and stared around for any sign of New Moral Army officers. The tunnel exit was at the bottom of a hill, which, although near the palace, was in such a filthy area that few people bothered coming near it. Nevertheless, you could never be too careful nowadays.

Waiting for her outside the tunnel was the tall and slim figure of her contact, a former New Moral Army soldier, now working for the resistance, by the name of Maande.

Maande walked over and placed her hand on Palma's shoulder. 'Glad you got here safely,' she said. 'Do you have the information?'

Palma nodded, then crouched down and reached into her satchel. She took out a clump of documents and handed them to Maande.

Maande began leafing through the pile of papers. Confined in these documents was a wealth of information that would help the resistance enormously. Plans of the palace, behavioural observations on the gods and their followers, and pages of prophecy from the sacred texts.

'Great,' said Maande. 'With these it shouldn't be long before we start to make some real dents in the gods' control network.'

Palma looked up at Maande. 'They're all there,' she told the soldier. 'There's no need to check.'

'I know,' said Maande. 'Force of habit, really.'

Palma looked up at the sky and noticed that a group of New Moral Army skimmers were gathering in the distance.

'Listen,' she told Maande, 'I'd better be going. I'm only meant to be on a rest break. If I'm not back by the Sultan's side in the next half-hour they might start to suspect.'

Maande nodded. 'That's OK. You've done your job.' She smiled, and placed her hand on the handmaiden's shoulder.

'You're very brave, Palma. The resistance won't forget what you have done for us today.'

Palma smiled. 'I just hope everything works out OK for us.'

'It will,' Maande insisted. 'It has to.'

Maande turned to leave, and Palma suddenly felt the need to ask her one last question. 'Maande?' she asked. 'How long will it be before we are free of the gods' control? How much longer will our suffering continue?'

Maande turned and looked at Palma with an obvious expression of doubt in her eyes. 'To tell the truth, I've no idea. All I know is that the time is near. I don't know how, but I can... I can just feel it. Try not to worry too much.'

Palma nodded and made a half-hearted attempt to smile. 'Thanks. I will.'

Suddenly her concentration broke as she felt a slight tremor in the ground.

'Did you feel that?' asked Palma.

'Feel what?' Maande replied.

'The ground. I swear it just moved.'

A bemused look crossed Maande's face. 'I didn't feel anything,' she said in a slightly confused tone. 'You must be imagining...' Her voice trailed off and a look of concern flashed across her face.

'What?' Palma asked. 'What is it?'

'Listen!' Maande urged. 'Do you hear that?' A quiet humming noise was getting louder, coming from an easterly direction. The ground shook again.

'OK,' said Maande. 'I felt *that*.'

They both looked over the crest of the hill to see where the noise was coming from.

'Oh no,' said Palma quietly, eyes widening in horror.

Rolling over the hill were four New Moral Army Converters - giant battle tanks the size of houses, all armed to the teeth in the name of religion. Across the planet, pockets of resistance were being wiped out by the NMA, and the Converters were the major reason why the army's genocidal campaigns were achieving such a high level of success.

The Converters were barely fifty metres away now, and the rumbling and vibrations caused by their engines were getting louder and more violent.

‘Quick,’ shouted Maande over the din. ‘Get away from here. It’s not safe any more, and we need you alive.’

Palma half expected the Converters to stop and fire on her. Had they really discovered that the resistance were using the tunnels to infiltrate the palace? The Converters turned before they got to the hillside and began driving down the path that led to the palace.

Palma sighed with relief. She looked at Maande, whose furrowed brow betrayed the worry she felt.

‘Look at them,’ Maande said, pointing to the huge machines. ‘What do you see?’

‘NMA Converters,’ Palma said blankly.

‘Not just any old Converters,’ Maande said impatiently. She pointed down the path to the back of one of them. ‘Do you see that red symbol?’

Palma strained her eyes and saw what Maande was talking about. ‘It’s the sign of Tehke. The devil himself.’

Maande fell to her knees and reached for a gun from the holster at her waist. She began loading it with an ammunition pack. ‘Tehke’s followers have been responsible for more atrocities than any other group since this god thing started.’ She stood up and dusted down her clothes. ‘If they’re in league with the Sultan now, then things have got even worse than we thought they were. Converters never normally venture this far into the centre of the city, let alone Converters displaying loyalty to Tehke. Something big must be happening, and I’m willing to bet it’s not going to be something pleasant. I have to go now.’

‘Are you going to tell the resistance about the Converters?’ Palma asked.

‘Yeah,’ laughed Maande. ‘But first I’m going to kill as many of those bastards as I can.’

Palma was unsure quite what to say at this point. Over the last few months it had become clear that the main reason the gods were so powerful was that they were strengthened by

the faith of their followers. In short, the gods were on to a winner. The more followers they converted, the more powerful they became, and this increased exponentially as each day went by. It had not taken long for the resistance to realize this, and it had not been long before it had started to sanction the murder of those supporting the gods. Nobody wanted' innocent people to die, but the fate of the planet was at stake here. If the followers were killed, then the gods' powers would lessen. Nobody was being forced to kill innocents if they did not want to - but the leaders of the resistance were not going to frown upon anyone who did so. This 'for-the-greater-good' mentality was the root of the problem many people had with the resistance.

This was another reason why the Pathetics refused to help the cause. Palma wished that everyone would stop being so stubborn about the issue. At the end of the day, they all wanted the same thing - a restoration of the peace and prosperity that Dellah had enjoyed before the reign of the gods - but it seemed that nobody could agree on how that objective could be achieved. Until they did so, the gods' influence would continue to grow.

Palma watched as Maande wedged her gun into her arms so that she was in a position where she could both run and fire. She turned to give a wry smile in Palma's direction, then ran off towards the Converters.

'Good luck,' Palma said quietly.

Once Maande was out of sight, Palma turned and walked back into the tunnel. She flicked on her pen torch, then sealed the heavy metal door shut from the inside. Her place by the Sultan's side meant that she was better placed than anyone to work out what the presence of the Converters meant. She had to get back to the palace to find out what was going on.

Palma hurried back through the tunnels until she reached the cellar underneath the palace where the tunnel terminated. She carefully left the cellar, emerging into a darkened corridor. There was unlikely to be anyone around,

but nevertheless she had to be extremely careful that no one saw her. The last thing the resistance needed was for their tunnel to be discovered by those loyal to the gods. Once she was safely away from the entrance to the cellar, she made her way towards the main throne room, where the Sultan would be waiting for her. As she left the dark and gloomy servants' area, she was as always struck by the difference between it and the luxury of the main part of the palace. As she got closer to the Sultan's throne room, the decor changed drastically.

As she emerged into the Grand Corridor of the palace her face was bathed in a golden glow from the sunlight that streamed in through the large windows lining it. Between the windows was an array of beautiful treasures and great paintings. The rest of Dellah may be suffering from war and devastation, but here in the palace the followers of the gods had gathered together all the plundered treasure they could, in the hope that they could help make the gods' lives on the surface of the planet more pleasurable.

Palma walked up to the door that led to the Sultan's throne room. She caught sight of herself in one of the Sultan's many mirrors, and realized that her clothes had acquired a layer of grime from her trek through the tunnels and her face was smeared with soot. She reached into a pocket, took out a handkerchief and began to wipe herself clean. Once she was presentable, she took out a comb, quickly rearranged her hair, then took a deep breath.

Palma felt flustered, and hoped that her appearance would not betray her recent exertions. She waited for several seconds to gather her thoughts, then reached down to knock on the door. She stopped suddenly before she did so, alerted to the presence of unfamiliar voices in the Sultan's chamber. This was a strange turn of events. Palma checked her watch. She was exactly on time to begin her daily duties, and the Sultan was usually alone at this time of day. First the Converters arrived in the palace grounds, now there was someone other than the Sultan in his chamber during his meditation. Palma guessed that the two events were

connected. She pushed her face towards a crack between the large doors that led to the Sultan's chamber. She peered through and saw the Sultan sitting on his throne, and next to him was a figure who confirmed Palma's worst fears. Although she had never seen him in the flesh (if such a word could be applied to a being who seemed to be partially made of fire) she had read enough books on the gods and seen enough paintings to recognize the terrifying form of Tehke, the Burning One.

Palma strained to hear what the Sultan and Tehke were saying. It was difficult to make out every word, but she managed to get a rough idea.

'How many more people do you need, Lord?' the Sultan was saying.

'No more than the existing quotas, and only enough to keep us going for another two weeks. After that, the Dellahans will have made their last sacrifice.'

Palma was not quite sure what to make of this statement, and it was clear that the Sultan was not, either.

'So what happens after two weeks?' the Sultan asked.

'From now until then,' Tehke said, 'my armies will spread across the planet and begin a chain of events that will lead to my ascension into heaven. In two weeks' time, my work on this world will be done. And boy, do I need a vacation.'

Palma felt her heart begin to race. Could it be that Tehke was implying that the gods were planning to leave Dellah?

'Are the other gods going with you into heaven?' the Sultan asked.

Tehke laughed and shook his head. 'Oh no, they have far more - how can I put it? - interesting business to attend to.'

'Such as?'

Tehke sighed. 'You people ask too many questions. If you must know, they are staying until they have passed judgement on your people.'

There was a pause, as if the Sultan was considering what Tehke had said. 'By judgement,' the Sultan asked, 'do you mean the Day of Reckoning?'

Palma was sure she could see a grin spread across Tehke's face. 'Yeah, that's the one. The day that everyone will be judged on just how faithful they have been since our return to the surface of the planet. On that day, the Pantheon will decide just who, out of the millions on this planet, will survive. Those who are found worthy will be transported with myself to a higher plane of existence, and those found wanting...' Tehke paused, as if relishing his words. 'They will be destroyed for ever.'

REVELATIONS

After Braxiatel had finished explaining the current situation on Dellah, they had stayed up for a couple of hours, eating whatever they could throw together from his fridge and discussing events on Benny's homeworld. They had eventually retired to bed emotionally, and in some cases physically, exhausted. Benny had slept uneasily. She dreamt of walking through the streets of Dellah, the ground covered in broken bones. Where once there were ponds and ornamental fountains on campus, instead she found a pool of blood. In spite of herself she knelt on the ground, the stench of decay in her nostrils. As she looked at her reflection in the pool Benny saw herself as an old woman, ageing further by the second. She watched herself crumble away, her own bones falling into the pool. As she died, she felt a strange feeling of lack of responsibility, a relief that she was not as important to the universe as others might make out. She had come to Dellah, and died. The inevitability of it was almost comforting, the idea that she had fulfilled some purpose. Why else would she go to Dellah, if not to die?

She woke in a sweat, her cotton nightshirt soaked and clammy. Her mouth was dry. Light streamed through the window, and there was the sound of raised voices outside. Morning. So much for a good night's sleep. Draining the glass of water by her bedside, she stumbled to the bathroom for a long, long soak. When she returned, she pulled on fresh clothes and towelled her hair, feeling far more human. The noises could still be heard outside, so she walked to the window and pulled open the curtains.

Benny let out an involuntary gasp. Someone, probably Braxiatel's little gardening drones, had been busy in the

night, and where there had previously been just rolling dunes shoots of fresh green grass were beginning to sprout. The purple sky over KS-159 was a light violet, with wisps of clean white cloud. It reminded her inescapably of marshmallows. Across this violet sky swooped Clarence, occasionally dropping to ground level to take a swipe at a target bot. As he did so, his sword burst into flames, making him look every bit the avenging angel. What was she turning him into? He was beautiful, yet he had turned from a serene figure to a warrior thanks to joining her on her travels. An exile, a travelling swordsman, helping her with her quests because they were hers.

Chris was also practising his aim, gunning down the target bots, occasionally running closer to engage them one on one. Benny knew she didn't have any reason to feel responsible for Chris: he made his own choices, and she wasn't even sure what most of those had been. Which was better - a bad choice you had no part in, or an ambiguous choice that could partially be your responsibility?

'Sov for them?' asked Clarence, floating outside her window, a look of concern across his perfect brow. His wings beat regularly as he hung there in midair.

'You're impossible, you know that?' she said quietly. 'I mean, no one could really fly with wings like yours. You're something else, some science indistinguishable from magic.'

'Magic?' he said, frowning.

'Magic,' repeated Benny. She leant out of the window, and kissed him on one perfect cheek. 'See you out there,' she said, leaving him baffled as she closed the window and left the room.

Benny fixed herself some cereal and, dragging a stool from the kitchen, went out on to the emerging lawn to eat. It was a fine morning for sitting out in the sun, watching your friends messing about. Chris was in a sweat by now, his chubby face damp and red as he struggled against the target bots. Clarence, of course, remained immaculate.

After a while, Jason staggered out to join her, collapsing on the ground with a cup of strong coffee in hand. She looked at

him; a wash, a nice bed and a good night's sleep, and he still looked like shite. His hair was a mess, and there were black hollows under his eyes. Put Jason in the Ritz for a week and he would still look like he'd been sleeping in the bins at the back. He looked old, rather worn out. Vulnerable. There was something rather endearing about him, half asleep, blinking in the sunlight.

She looked between Jason and Clarence, who was still swooping over their heads. One all too human, the other far too perfect. So different, but both so eager to please her. She should be flattered - hell, she *was* flattered. Two of the galaxy's most eligible bachelors, the roguish bestselling author and the gleaming, graceful angel. She was also aware that she didn't take either of them that seriously, that she probably enjoyed the journey but wasn't that interested in the destination. Was that cruel?

After lunch, Braxiatel came to collect them all, and together they marched across the green-speckled dunes to the large steel hangar where preparations for their departure were being made. As they walked, Benny sidled up to Braxiatel.

'You said you've been dealing with people on Earth over this,' said Benny tentatively. 'I have to admit I was surprised. The Earth government's hardly been the most positive influence on this corner of space, and you've never been that keen on them in the past. Why now?'

'Call it resource management,' said Braxiatel slyly, evading the moral tone of her question. 'Security for Earth contributes to the stability of an entire stretch of space, just as the resolution of the Dellah situation will bring peace to this part of the galaxy. I'm juggling so many diplomatic balls at the moment, and Earth are keen to show they can play the diplomatic game as well as everybody else. Their leverage will help me fulfil my ambitions. And yes, I know that they have expansionist plans, but after all we've seen recently I'd far rather see humanity's destiny in humanity's hands for once, than being jerked around by the gods and their ilk.'

'I suppose you're right,' said Benny. 'But it still leaves a nasty taste in your mouth.'

'Well, sorry,' said Braxiatel. 'But it's the only way. Apart from anything else, it was academics on Earth who came up with the solution I'm proposing, and provided the ship you'll need. Most of the components are cannibalized from alien technology, but in a way only a human could think of. We wouldn't be able to do this without Earth's help, Benny, no matter how distasteful it might be.'

'So what's this ship like?' asked Chris, always eager to get his hands on the fastest vehicle available.

'Functional enough,' replied Braxiatel. They had reached the hangar doors, and Braxiatel led them in. 'But Emile will have to tell you the rest. He's co-ordinated most of this protect while I've been dealing with the Vremnyans.' A shrill beep came from Braxiatel's pocket. 'Speaking of which, I'll have to leave you with Emile now. This call might be important.' He disappeared out of the door before anyone could even say goodbye.

They were left on their own to wait. The hangar was a cavernous space, sectioned off with scaffolding and semi-transparent screens. Behind one set of screens some vast shape was being worked on, the flaring of laser welding in progress clear through the flimsy material.

'Interesting,' said Chris, ever the technophile. He was peering at the screens, trying to make out the shape behind them.

'That's the ship you'll be flying,' said a soft yet authoritative voice from across the hangar. 'The *Revelation*, a dimension-hopping vessel, just being repaired after its last journey. You'll be taking it to Dellah.'

Emile half walked, half ran to meet them, obviously eager to show them his plan. 'Come along, you lot,' he said, voice echoing across the vast space. 'We have to get going. As you can appreciate, we've had to move the timescale forward thanks to recent pressure.'

'What pressure?' asked Clarence.

Emile stopped in his tracks, and looked between Chris and Clarence. 'You mean you didn't know? Don't your people tell you anything?'

'No,' said Chris.

'We fell out of touch,' said Clarence coldly.

'Well,' said Emile. 'Your two races have come to an agreement. If the Dellah situation's not resolved in two days' time, this entire sector will be sterilized. The Worldsphere will retreat into a dimensional pocket, the other side will plug up their bottle, and a Doomsday Probe will be launched. When the probe reaches Dellah it'll activate, and for five seconds a wave of accelerated entropy will sweep across this sector. The ravages of time will do their work, draining energy from every single cell. All life will be destroyed.'

'I don't believe they'll do it,' whispered Clarence to Chris, as Emile led them to a conference area at the other end of the hangar. 'They wouldn't, would they?'

'Wipe out a large chunk of space?' hissed Chris. 'Of course they would, to protect themselves. My people would, and so would yours. They'd sooner destroy everything in the space between their homes than reach across and co-operate to find a solution.'

'They believe it's a sacrifice that needs to be made, for the greater good of the whole universe,' said Emile, slipping in between them and butting into the conversation. 'This is justification enough for them to take such drastic action. It's a simple enough equation, in their eyes.'

'But how do we stop them?' asked Jason.

'We take the gods out of that equation,' said Emile, indicating for them to sit. The meeting area was littered with pieces of equipment, clearly laid out for Emile to demonstrate to them later. 'Or, more to the point, we take them home.'

'What?' said Benny.

'Home,' repeated Emile excitedly. 'Their point of origin, where they came from. That's it, you see. The Berkeley team stumbled across the place the gods originated from.'

‘So, where’s home for these little charmers?’ asked Benny. And why are we taking them there? Is Mummy going to spank the naughty gods for being bad?’

‘You’re surprisingly close to the mark,’ said Emile. ‘Allow me to explain. As you can probably guess, these scientists at Berkeley have been dealing with the most advanced super-technologies imaginable. They’re on to the next generation of research, moving into whole new areas of exploration, breaking the next barrier.’

‘Other universes,’ said Chris, quietly impressed. ‘You’re talking about crossing over into other universes?’

‘Exactly,’ said Emile, smiling. ‘Other realities, in the broadest sense. Multidimensional constructs, parallel universes, temporal embolisms, pocket alternates, astral planes, the whole lot. They construct vehicles like the one out there, mid go out to see what they can find. And on one of their expeditions they found something interesting. A universe in the last throes of life, with very little conventional energy.’

‘A dead universe,’ said Benny. ‘How inviting.’

‘No,’ corrected Emile. ‘Not dead. Well, not quite. Although it n lacked conventional energy, this universe ran on *completely different* scientific rules from ours. Of course, there were many similarities. But there were enough differences for the people, the living things there, to operate on a totally different level from life in our universe. It was, in many ways, a far tougher environment, requiring incredible psionic ability just to survive. A person from that universe, if they could come here, would be -’

‘A god,’ said Benny quietly. ‘They would be a god.’

‘But take them back,’ said Emile. ‘And they’ll be vulnerable. Especially if you take them to a particularly hostile area of that universe. The *Revelation* was small enough to avoid scrutiny, but a whole planet appearing would certainly draw attention.’

‘Oh, no way,’ said Jason. ‘You must be joking. Are you saying we have to move a whole damn planet into a completely different universe?’

Emile shrugged. 'Why not? The process is the same as for the ship, but on a different scale. All you need is this node.' He opened up a crate on the floor, and lifted out a twenty-centimetre-wide, silver-coated disc with a series of claws at its edge. 'Plug the node into a sufficient power source – in this case, the power station at Casmov – and the whole planet jumps a groove, into this other universe. One where the gods have no powers, where the creatures have no alpha waves for them to feed on.'

'That little thing can jump universes?' said Benny. It just looked like a ridiculously oversized brooch to her.

'Dimensional engineering, I'll bet,' said Chris. 'That little thing will just be the user interface. The rest of the machine – a small planet's worth of equipment, I imagine – will be tucked away in the higher dimensions, so it adds no physical element to the accessible part of the device. It makes repairs difficult, but, with all the components existing in a custom-made environment, it means it won't be affected by whatever weird stunts the gods try to pull.' He paused for breath. 'But where do we come into all of this? If these Berkeley guys are clever enough to build gadgets like this, and Earth is so big on expanding, how did we get involved?'

'Because of Brax,' said Emile. 'As one of the biggest sponsors of advanced research in human space, Irving has a lot of reports on projects passing his desk. Only he realized the relevance of the data the *Revelation* had gathered. So he struck a deal to borrow this equipment. Earth government think they're backing an exploration mission which will provide vital defence information. They have no idea what we're really using it for.'

'OK,' said Benny. 'So we take this node thing to the power source, slap it on and – *wham!* – Dellah gets transported out of our universe. Gone, no problem. One question: how do we get back?'

'The node can plug into the *Revelation* itself,' said Emile. 'Slap it in place under the ship's control panel and it'll take you straight back home. And I wouldn't bother hanging around to see the gods get theirs: we can't be entirely sure

who's in charge of this other universe, but from what we can gather they seem to operate on some psionic basis, a more direct and less mechanical manipulation of their environment than most species in this universe are capable of. The overlap between the application of will and the restructuring of matter seems fairly common over there. They never encountered any of the more powerful beings directly, but there is evidence of a tyrannical nature, a penchant for brutality.'

'Oh wonderful,' said Chris, sighing. 'But, aside from the natives, we'll be OK? Provided one of us can get to the -'

'No,' interrupted Emile. 'It can only be Benny or Jason who places this node. The two parties threatening the destruction of this sector won't allow anyone from the other side to touch this technology. That's part of the agreement we made with them to buy us this time. If Chris or Clarence touches the node, it'll kill him before self-destructing. Only neutral parties like Benny or Jason can operate the node. As Chris hinted, these parties are nothing if not paranoid about the other side getting hold of this kind of technology.'

Clarence looked baffled. 'So what's our role in all this? If we're barely even welcome on this trip...'

'Originally, firepower,' said Emile bluntly. 'Clarence has a degree of strength the others among you lack, while Chris's combat training is impeccable. But recent events on Vremnya have changed this. As you know, Brax is trying to broker a peace deal there. Unfortunately we need Teran Sevic there or the negotiations will never even get started. Half the generals say Sevic is the only person they'll deal with. Guess where he was last seen.'

Chris rolled his eyes. 'Dellah,' he intoned bleakly. 'Great. I've heard of this guy. He's a real fanatic, an absolute charmer. Most people think it was his rabble-rousing that caused the damn war in the first place.'

'He's also the only one who can stop it,' said Emile. 'We'll give you all his personal details. The last sighting was somewhere within the vicinity of the Sultan of Tashwari's palace. Our agents have been unable to locate him since his

disappearance after the collapse of his diplomatic mission to visit the Sultan. At the very least we need confirmation of his death, as various groups on Vremnya are currently accusing each other of killing Sevic off, then faking the Dellah trip to cover their tracks.'

'This just gets better!' wailed Chris. 'Tell me you have some decent toys for me to play with on this trip.'

Emile smiled slyly.

Benny and Jason had decided to adjourn to the neighbouring room to discuss their plans for their half of the mission, while Chris and Clarence stayed next door to discuss appropriate hardware with Emile. A rather grim mood had settled over the estranged couple, and they spent most of the time poring over maps of the Casmov area in silence.

'You do realize this is a suicide mission, don't you?' said Jason suddenly. 'They're only sending us on this because we're dispensable. Do we really want to go through with this?'

There was a brief silence, as Benny thought it through.

'Oh, why not?' she said. 'After all, I've died before and it never did me any harm then.'

'I'm serious,' said Jason. 'They're sending us because they don't mind if we die by one of the many hideous forms of death that await us, and because we're too stupid to tell them where to stick it!'

Benny rolled her eyes. 'Don't be so damn paranoid. This is Brax and Emile, not some conspiracy. They're our friends, we can trust them. And that's enough for me. As for Chris and Clarence's people, they think we're being sent because we're deniable, we're disposable, and because we're too stupid and primitive to do anything with the technology except push the big red button. Anyone smarter and they'd get worried.'

'Yeah,' said Jason resignedly. 'I know. It's just, since when have we been so important? It just seems strange we should be risking our lives like this. When did our lives go so wrong that we end up involved in all this cosmic shit?'

Benny put her arm through his, and squeezed it comfortingly.

'We should never have looked up,' said Benny. 'If we'd stayed looking at the ground, never looked up at the stars, this would never have happened. We'd have never travelled the spaceways, never fallen through time, never fought monsters...' She trailed off.

'Let's face it,' Jason said. 'If we *had* stuck to our own times and places, we'd never even have met.'

'Never got married,' added Benny.

'Never got divorced,' continued Jason.

They stopped, glancing sideways at each other.

'Would that have been better?' asked Benny. 'To have led a quiet life, and never have come this far?'

Jason let a slow grin sneak up the corner of his mouth. 'What do you think?'

'Alpha-wave disrupters,' said Emile, passing Chris a couple of tiny silver discs. 'Get Benny and Jason to slip these behind their ears, and they'll be protected against the gods' influence. They'll feel a bit woozy occasionally, but the overall effect will be beneficial. They're linked to the comlinks, so any emergency signal sent will zap their brains into gear.'

'Don't I need one of these?' asked Chris plaintively. 'I'm human too.'

Emile waved a mediscanner up and down Chris's body, peering at the results. 'With nuclei like those you're pretty far from human. And your bosses will have hard-wired enough psychic defences into your brain to protect you. Besides, if you're really stuck the comlinks will key in bursts of interference to whack your brainwaves into line. Any attempt at conditioning will be broken. You can set the disruption on a regularly repeating cycle.'

'Clever,' said Clarence, who, as an entirely self-sufficient artificial being, had never really appreciated the gadgets other creatures needed. Artificial personalities were, apparently safe from the gods' influence, so he was in no real danger.

'Weapons,' said Chris. 'We're going to need a lot of weapons.'

‘No worries,’ said Emile. ‘We’ve stocked the *Revelation* with the good stuff. Explosives, both static and in missile form. Energy weapons, although we’re not sure whether they’ll be any use in the other universe. If in doubt, we’ve got nice old-fashioned machine pistols, all moving parts and no tricky energy source. Oh, and dart guns tipped with tranquillizers for if you’re feeling generous towards the hypnotized, fanatical masses.’

Chris sighed with pleasure. ‘If we get out of this alive, can I join your gang? You seem to have all the best toys.’

Benny and Jason had spent an hour laying out various maps of Dellah and plotting the obstacles on their way. In spite of herself Benny felt a mounting sense of excitement. She was going home, at last. Maybe it was one last trip, to say goodbye to the planet for good, and maybe she faced nothing but danger - and, as in her dream, death - but, all the same, she was returning to Dellah. If nothing else she would get a part in dealing with the bastards who had destroyed her home, getting rid of them for good. Revenge was an unusual motive for Bernice, one she found slightly repellent. But it was what she felt. She *needed* to see the gods suffer, for turning her beautiful university, with all its silliness and bureaucracy and triviality and stupidity, into a killing field, a charred hole in the churned earth.

‘Here,’ said Jason, tracing his finger across one of the maps. ‘Casmov. According to all reliable reports, Dellah’s only remaining major power station. Unfortunately, it’s also the most -’

‘Inaccessible,’ finished Benny wearily. ‘I thought you might say that. How inaccessible?’

Jason shrugged. ‘The usual inconveniences. Halfway up a mountain. Arctic conditions. Access used to be by a subsurface hypertunnel, but the Sons of Lud blasted the crap out of it shortly after the rise of the gods. We’re going to have to take the slow way.’

‘Great,’ said Benny. ‘Our combat-trained former Adjudicator and bulletproof demigod get the cushy number

arsing about with the Sultan, while we get the three-day crawl across the ice.'

'As the gods say, we were born to suffer,' said Jason dryly, a wry smile creeping up his face.

'Aren't we just?' said Benny, smiling back. Her smile faded slightly. 'You do realize this will be the last time either of us see Dellah. We're going to have to leave all those people out there to fend for themselves.' She let out a mirthless, slightly desperate laugh. 'To save the universe I have to destroy my own home, damn my neighbours.' She realized her hands were shaking, her voice quivering.

Jason, calm, took her hands in his, looked into her eyes. 'Those people - and I doubt there are many left now - are slaves to the gods. In this other universe, the gods won't have any power over them. It may be the only chance they have to live a life of freedom, no matter how dangerous.'

'And will that be worth it?' she asked. Benny realized that she actually cared about the answer, that what Jason said would decide whether she could go through with this. Jason Kane, moral arbiter. Who would have thought it?

'Of *course*,' said Jason. 'After all we've been through, you should know that all the danger in the world would be worth it. We got to make our own choices, and they deserve the same privilege, don't they? Unless we get rid of these gods, they'll never have a chance to think for themselves.'

Benny was nodding at this, but before she could respond a cough came from the doorway. They turned to see Braxiatel.

'We *do* get to say goodbye after all,' said Benny.

'Sorry to interrupt,' said Braxiatel. 'But the *Revelation* is almost ready to fly. We'll need you over there soon.'

'Looks like our ship's come in,' said Jason, getting to his feet. 'How long will it take us to get there?'

'The *Revelation* is a multidimensional craft,' said Braxiatel. 'You'll reach the Dellah blockade in less than an hour. Any closer and the vworp engines might cause a severe disturbance.'

‘A blockade run?’ said Benny, rolling her eyes. ‘This just gets better. The way this trip is turning out, we’ll be lucky if we only get killed once.’

Braxiatel and Emile watched the skies as the *Revelation* smoothly took off, breaking through the atmosphere and heading away from KS-159.

‘I should have gone with them,’ said Emile quietly.

‘So soon after your convalescence?’ said Braxiatel. ‘That wouldn’t be at all wise. Think of those blackouts you still have. Not much help if you’re halfway up Mount Casmov. Remember, Bernice Summerfield may be able to get up after a near-death experience and head off into another adventure, but that’s because she’s had years of practice. Most humans only live once.’

‘Yeah,’ said Emile. ‘I suppose you’re right. Besides, they can manage this mission easily, can’t they?’

‘They have to,’ said Braxiatel. ‘Or we’re in big trouble. I can’t stall the launch of the Doomsday Probe for ever. I’m an outcast - my voice has limited influence these days. Anyway, you’d better be off. I need you to call the negotiating team to check the details for my arrival.’

‘On to it,’ said Emile, walking away.

Braxiatel stood on his own looking up at the sky. He wondered about all the worlds out there, and all the people on those worlds. If Benny and her friends failed, in a couple of days all of them would be dead.

THE BLOCKADE RUN

The observation deck at the front of the *Revelation* gave a spectacular view of the planet Dellah as the ship came within visual range. Benny leant on a railing at the front of the deck and placed her left hand on the window. It had been almost a year since she had seen the planet, and, after all the trauma and adventure that year had brought, she had forgotten how nice it looked. Like a sugar-coated emerald hanging in the sunlight, Dellah was the most serene-looking planet in the sector, brown-green and covered in fractal patterns made up of powdery grey clouds that created an almost unreal effect on the atmosphere. The planet did not appear to glisten as much as Benny remembered though, a possible side effect of a lower-than-usual rain count. Even so, it was quite a sight.

Benny shook her head slightly. She felt both sad and bewildered as she thought about how different life was on the surface of the planet, even though from space it looked the same as always. Benny remembered the laughs, the adventures, all the *living* that she had enjoyed during her time there. All that was gone now. The university, the freedom of the Dellahans, all of it lost to the whims of the so-called gods. Benny had heard the stories about how the planet had changed since she had last visited - how the gods really did control everything now - but she knew that she would not really be able to take in the true extent of things until she saw the damage for herself. To think that beneath that same beautiful exterior where she had lived and worked for a long time now, there lay a place of pain and suffering where few people could survive without being swept up into a deadly religious fervour. She couldn't imagine anything more tragic. Another reason for Benny to worry (as if she needed

one) was that the last report had come in from Dellah before *B-Aaron* had crashed into the planet. The ship had been carrying an infectious agent that existed by absorbing faith. They had all hoped that this would result in the removal of the influence the gods had on the Dellahans, and Clarence had reported signs that this was happening, but it was clear that things had not gone exactly to plan, and the gods were still in power. The question was, if the ship did not cause the end of the gods' reign, what effect did it have?

Benny knew that the mission wouldn't be easy. The main fear she had was that, this time, everything was far too close to home. She had, in the past, found long-lost objects, defeated monsters and toppled dictators, but it had always been on her own terms, and on other people's turf. This time, it affected her personally. She knew that this would be her only chance to rescue whatever remained from her former life, and that there was probably more pressure on her to succeed now than ever before. If she failed, every man, woman and child, not to mention every other bloody thing in this region of space - in *her* region of space - would be obliterated. Still, at least she was in a position where she could *try* to do something. What was it like for those who were helpless, who could only sit back and watch as their worlds were torn apart by the gods?

A sharp beeping noise from a panel on a wall snapped Benny to attention. She stumbled over to the panel and pressed it, activating the communications link with the cockpit.

'Hello?' she said.

'Benny?' Chris's voice said through the speaker. 'We'll be arriving in Dellah's atmosphere in twenty-five minutes. I thought you'd better get up here for final briefing. Jason's just been up here and has gone back to his quarters to get some last-minute rest. Once we're over Casmov, you can get down to the cargo deck and get suited and booted for the mission.'

'Right. OK,' Benny said. Whatever was going on down there, it looked like they were about to find out.

Across the other side of the ship, Chris Cwej sat in the pilot seat, waiting for them to reach the point where a human pair of hands might be needed to control their trajectory. The autopilot was so efficient that there was little for Cwej to do, but there was something about sitting in the pilot's seat that made him feel comfortable. Maybe he held a subconscious longing to return to his youth, when his mother had let him run to the front of the skimmer so he could pretend to be the driver. Or maybe he just wanted to be the one in charge for once. Whatever his reasons, he knew it felt good. And besides, when it came down to it, he knew no one who was a better pilot than he was.

Cwej glanced across at the copilot's seat, where Clarence was sitting with his head in his hands, concentrating intensely. The angel's head shot up, and he took in a large breath of air.

'I wonder,' Clarence said.

'Go on,' Cwej urged.

Clarence looked to his left, then to his right, and then put his face up to the metal plating of the control panel to try to read the manufacturer's writing.

Cwej chuckled at this behaviour, but felt guilty about doing so. 'You're not going to get it, are you?' he chastised.

'Yes I will,' insisted Clarence, an intense frown spreading across his face. 'You've just made it too obscure.'

'Listen, there's no need to be rude about this.'

Clarence held up a single finger and tilted his head slightly, giving Cwej a look that said, Be quiet. The angel stood up from his seat. 'Now. Something beginning with C...'

There was a hiss of air as the door to the cabin opened, Cwej turned to see who had entered, and smiled when he saw who it was.

'Constellation!' Benny announced, in a far-too-proud-of-herself-for-her-own-good voice.

'What?' said a confused Clarence. 'Is that right?'

Cwej nodded. 'Fraid so. I never said the thing had to be inside the spaceship.'

Clarence shook his head violently, his pale white face turning a slight shade of purple. 'That's not fair,' he moaned. 'I bet you'd never trick a human like that.'

Hey!' Benny chipped in. 'No need to get speciesist.' Clarence slouched down into his chair, sulking like a baby.

It's a stupid game anyway,' Clarence said.

'Of course,' chuckled Cwej, 'but it's something of a tradition on space flights, even short ones. Anyway, you're the one who wanted to forsake flying for this trip. You're the one who wanted to see the stars from a human point of view.' Cwej turned to Benny. 'Before we get ready to drop you and Jason off, I could do with a hand getting through the planetary defences. The *Revelation's* a pretty tough little thing, but Dellah's damn well protected.'

'So what do you want me to do?' asked Benny.

'Just make sure I don't do anything stupid,' Cwej said. 'You know Dellah far better than the rest of us.'

Benny sighed and planted herself down on a chair at the back of the cockpit. 'Just because I lived there doesn't mean I can defuse ten weapons satellites. You'd be lasered to shreds before you could say something very short indeed if I was in charge of things.'

'Well,' said Cwej, shrugging his shoulders, 'it looks like we're about to find out.'

A large metallic object had just appeared on the viewscreen, and was getting rapidly closer. It was silver, about the size of a small bus, and had large spikes of metal jutting out at various mimics. Cwej instantly recognized the object for what it was. An EGA 97 Proximity Detector. One of the weapons satellites that Benny had mentioned - a device that would scan an area of several hundred square kilometres for ships, looking for anything that wasn't registered as a legitimate transport or a communications satellite. If it found what it was looking for, the Proximity Detector would fire a stream of projected energy that would set off a nuclear reaction in the ship, frying everyone inside. It was a nasty piece of kit, despite being considered little more than a baby's toy by Cwej's adopted people.

‘Those things are always proving troublesome,’ Benny announced. ‘I’m afraid that sort of thing is a bit beyond my expertise. Any ideas, Chris?’

‘Actually,’ said Cwej, ‘I think I do.’

Benny grinned in relief. ‘Told you I wasn’t needed.’

Cwej flicked a switch on the control panel and a compartment hissed open revealing a battered old laptop computer. ‘Thing is,’ he said, ‘when I said I know how we can sort it out, I didn’t say we didn’t need you.’

A look of bewilderment crossed Benny’s face as Cwej handed her the computer.

‘So let me get this straight,’ Benny said, pointing to the Proximity Detector. ‘You know how I can take out that thing -’ she held up the laptop ‘- with this piece of junk?’

‘Hey,’ Cwej reprimanded, ‘don’t be rude about the technology. Do you know exactly what it is the Proximity Detectors are supposed to detect?’

Benny nodded. ‘Weapons technology, right?’

Cwej smiled. ‘Exactly. More specifically, weapons-control technology. That computer’s so out of date nobody would ever dream of using it to control their weapons.’

Benny looked impressed by Cwej’s ingenuity.

‘Plus,’ he told her, trying desperately not to sound smug, ‘those old things are great for hacking into control systems. I need to put all my concentration into piloting this thing, so I need you to keep the Detector busy.’

‘Can I help at all?’ asked Clarence.

‘You can man the weapons systems, just in case things get ugly.’ Winding Clarence up was always fun, not to mention incredibly easy.

Benny flicked on the laptop and began to activate the connection with the Detectors.

‘I say,’ she chuckled, ‘this is pretty user-friendly. Ten seconds on and I’m already in the main control system. Brax’s friends certainly know their code.’

Benny hit a few keys. Cwej was pleased with the speed with which she appeared to be figuring out the control system.

‘There,’ she said triumphantly. ‘That should do it!’

Cwej looked towards the viewscreen and stared at the EGA 97.

A small indented ring on the outside of the satellite began to glow red, and the object started to shake slightly.

‘I hate to tell you this, Benny,’ sighed Cwej, ‘but this does not look good.’

‘Oh bollocks,’ Benny said. ‘I’m sorry. I could have sworn “D” stood for “Deactivate”.’

Clarence shook his head in despair. ‘Don’t worry, you tried. Unfortunately, I think in this instance “D” means “Destroy”!’

‘In that case,’ said Cwej, ‘we’d better get out of its way, and fast!’

Cwej yanked out a hidden control panel and rapidly tapped in a series of manoeuvres. The ship lurched, and the Proximity Detector disappeared from the viewscreen.

‘Hold on tight,’ he yelled to the others. There was a loud bang as an explosion somewhere in the bowels of the *Revelation* rocked the ship violently from side to side.

‘Shit,’ Cwej said, desperately trying to juggle about ten different tasks at once. ‘We’ve been hit!’

Benny dashed over to the tertiary pilot’s seat and checked the readings on the display. ‘It’s hit the secondary thrusters. The hull’s still intact but our directional systems will be pretty screwed for a while.’

Cwej breathed a sigh of relief and checked the Detector’s position and status. Realizing it was about to fire again, he slammed on the thrusters on the top of the ship, sending the *Revelation* plummeting downward. A bolt of energy surged so close that he instinctively ducked, but luckily it appeared to miss the ship this time.

‘Erm, Chris?’ yelled Benny across the cockpit.

‘What is it?’ Cwej asked.

‘Well,’ Benny said, shaking her head, ‘I’m not sure if you realize this, but there’s another ten of those things to get through.’

‘Typical!’ said Cwej. ‘You always have to think positive about stuff, don’t you?’

Cwej realized that if they were going to get through this situation alive they had to think quickly.

‘Benny,’ he asked, ‘how many targets can those things tackle at once?’

Benny shrugged. ‘Not sure. Probably just the one. Why?’

‘I’m not sure. The stealth shield is up, so it must be attacking based on our heat emissions rather than our technology. Hang on, let me try something.’

Cwej tapped a code into a control panel and found himself pulled back into his seat as the ship lurched forward.

‘What are you doing?’ yelled Benny. ‘We’re going so fast we’ll be toasted by the other EGAs!’

‘It’s OK,’ Cwej assured her. ‘I just needed to build up some speed.’

Cwej reached for the acceleration lever, and rammed it backward as quickly as he could. The ship shook and there was a loud groaning sound as the engines slowed down. In seconds, the engines were silent, but the motion Cwej had previously built up meant that they continued to shoot forward, right into the path of the other EGA 97s.

‘So,’ an exasperated sounding Benny said, ‘we stop the engines so there’s no heat, right?’

Cwej nodded. ‘That’s the plan.’ He checked a temperature gauge. ‘Unfortunately, we’re still pretty hot.’ He flicked another switch. ‘There, that should do it. I’ve dumped the coolant on to the thrusters.’

There was another explosion as the ship was hit once more.

‘Damage?’ Cwej asked.

‘Upper hull hit,’ said Clarence. ‘Sealing now. Should be OK.’

‘Chris,’ said Benny urgently, ‘we can’t just let the ship hurtle through space on its own speed. We’ve got to control it somehow.’

‘Hey,’ Cwej assured her, ‘no worries. We’re on course for Dellah. We should drift straight past the EGAs.’

‘But one more hit and we’ll be more fried than one of Jason’s breakfasts.’

‘Benny,’ said Cwej calmly, ‘the engines should be cold by now. They won’t even know we’re here.’ He tried to give her a look that might be interpreted as reassuring. ‘We’ll be fine, just wait a moment.’

They waited. Nothing happened.

Benny arched one eyebrow, extremely confused. ‘Erm, shouldn’t that thing have fired again by now?’

Cwej grinned. ‘I knew it would work. That’s the problem with heat detectors. They’re very rarely *cold* detectors. As far as the EGA knows, we’re out of range.’

Benny smiled, as if she were just realizing that for the first time in several minutes there was little chance of their being blown to smithereens. ‘So,’ she said, ‘we’ve stopped them hitting us, and now we can drift past safely until we’re out of range. Then, we have to deal with the bureaucrats.’

Cwej sighed. ‘Killer satellites I can handle, but red tape?’ He pointed to Benny. ‘I think this is where you take over.’

It took about two minutes before the *Revelation’s* sensors told Cwej that they were safely out of the EGA’s firing range. He reached down and carefully activated the controls that would let him start the engines again, allowing him to fire a burst of thrust that would bring their craft to a full stop. They weren’t out of the woods yet.

A gentle humming noise began, and everything on the viewscreen froze.

‘OK, that should do it,’ Cwej said. ‘We’re in a stationary orbit.’

A quiet beeping sound started to emanate from a panel on the other side of the cockpit from where Cwej was sitting. A stream of information began to scroll up a small monitor next to the panel. Clarence flicked a switch on the panel, which stopped the beeping, then read out the message.

‘The Dellahan Transit Authority requests that we download our visa and/or passport packets, together with details of the purpose of our visit and our religious beliefs.’

‘Great stuff,’ said Benny. ‘Tell them we’re here to worship the god Vokarebull, and wish to join a pilgrimage to his temple.’

Cwej hoped Benny knew what she was doing. 'OK,' he said, 'but if they don't like our choice of god, we'll be toast.'

A painfully long silence followed, as the entire cockpit went into breathless anticipation.

Another beeping noise started, much louder this time.

Cwej sighed. 'They want to open a vidcomm channel.'

Benny stood up and cleared her throat. 'Right, you two, get to the back of the room. Clarence, cover those wings. I'll deal with this one.'

Cwej and Clarence did as they were told, moving to the very back of the cockpit. Benny scuttled over to her chair and picked up her coat. She quickly put it on, and lifted the hood over her head.

She turned to Cwej and Clarence. 'Don't worry,' she assured them, 'I'm not quite enough of an egomaniac to think that they'll recognize me. I just think I'll pass a bit easier for a religious nut if I cover my head.'

Whatever, thought Cwej.

Benny reached down to the console and flicked the viewscreen on.

'Hello,' she said. 'This is Bettina, child of Vokarebull. How may I assist you?'

The screen fizzled into life and the shape of a green-skinned human appeared. 'Officer Witwicky here. Why did you destroy one of our EGAs?'

'Erm,' said Benny, 'jolly good question that. Er...'

'Come on,' whispered Cwej. 'Think of something.'

Benny shot him a look of vehemence and then quickly returned her attention to the viewscreen.

'Well,' she said to the officer, ad-libbing for her life, 'they tried to stop us, but we convinced them that we knew what we were letting ourselves in for. Sorry about the satellite. We thought it was the blockade firing on us. If we'd known...'

The officer had turned away and was conferring with someone offscreen.

There was an agonizing wait of about half a minute before the officer resumed his conversation with Benny.

'How many worshippers are you carrying?' he asked.

Benny turned to Clarence. 'He's going to scan us - it's just procedure. Will you be detected.'

Clarence nodded. 'I can be, if it helps. I'll put up a corporeal shield to make me appear human.'

Benny nodded and returned to the viewscreen. 'Just four,' she told the officer. 'But we hope to convert some more along the way.'

The officer smiled. 'That's the spirit. That figure seems to match our scans. You may go on your way.'

The officer's image was replaced with a field of static as the communications link was cut.

'Well,' said Benny with a confident smile on her face, 'it looks like we're through.'

The *Revelation* started to build up speed and Cwej began steering the ship through a safe path into Dellah's atmosphere.

The sight of space on the viewscreen was soon replaced by the halo of fire that surrounded the ship as it entered the atmosphere. Although the ship's shields protected its contents from the heat, Cwej had always found himself feeling hotter whenever he was in a ship making planetfall. It was probably a side effect of the adrenalin rush the whole business brought with it.

The bright heat cloud soon cleared, and Cwej found that he was able to make out the green-grey colour of land far below.

'Well, we're through the atmosphere,' he announced.

'At long last,' said Clarence melodramatically. 'I thought we might never make it.' Clarence got up out of his seat and walked to the back of the cockpit. He pressed a few buttons and a heavy metallic blast shield moved away to reveal a viewing window that would show them just what was going on in the outside world far better than any viewscreen. Cwej flicked a switch on one of his control panels and the front viewscreen moved away so that he too was seeing nothing but reality.

'Well done, Chris,' said Benny. 'Now, I suggest we head straight for the ice flats near Casmov. It's quite isolated, and

there should be enough space around there for you to drop me and Jason safely.'

'Sounds like a good plan,' said Cwej, nodding his head.

Benny shuffled over to the front of the cockpit and started feeding in directions to the navigation computer.

Cwej leant back in his chair and smiled. 'A job well done,' he said. 'Even if I do say so myself. Now we just sit back, and wait for the autopilot to get us into position.'

'Cwej!' snapped Benny.

'What? What's wrong?'

'Don't you know the first rule of infiltration? Never assume anything!'

As if it could hear Benny's words, the comms channel started to beep again.

'Great,' Benny said, 'I knew you'd spoken too soon.' She reached down and flicked the channel open. This time there was only an audio feed coming through. 'Hello?' she said loudly into the microphone. 'Officer Witwicky? Is that you?'

'*Shuttle Revelation*,' announced a voice over the comms channel, 'you are ordered to halt your descent immediately.'

'Bugger,' Benny said, sitting up in surprise. 'What's wrong?' She leant towards the microphone and resumed her bewildered-pilgrim act. 'Is something the matter, Officer?' she asked innocently.

'We've checked the records. Vokarebull is not a member of the Pantheon, and thus worship of such a deity is illegal. Worse than that, there's no mention of such a name anywhere in the texts of any of the registered religions for this sector. In short, we know you're screwing with us, and you're under arrest.'

'Ah,' said Benny, 'right. I see why you might be a bit confused.'

'Er, Benny?' said Clarence, who was staring out of the rear window. 'I don't think we're very popular right now.'

Benny got out of her seat and ran to see what Clarence was talking about. 'What do you mean ...? Oh, right.'

Cwej got up from his chair and joined them. Two attack fighters were closing in on them fast. Cwej guessed that they had been launched from an orbital monitoring station.

‘I recognize that design,’ Benny said. ‘They’re from the Sultan’s personal fleet.’

‘Which means?’ Cwej asked.

‘Which means they’re definitely not friendly to the likes of heathen hordes like us!’

A voice crackled out over the comms channel. ‘Shuttle *Revelation*? Are you there?’

‘Oh bugger,’ said Benny, clutching her head. ‘I forgot about you.’ She ran back over to the control panel and switched the channel off. ‘There,’ she said. ‘I somehow doubt diplomacy will do us any more good today.’

‘They’re closing on us fast,’ shouted Clarence.

Cwej reached for the manual controls, flipped up a rear-view monitor in front of his eyes and braced himself for a dogfight. ‘Be ready with the weapons, Clarence,’ he called. ‘I think we’re going to need them.’

Cwej checked the tactical scanner. One of the other aircraft was speeding up, trying to get a position alongside the *Revelation*.

‘Oh no you don’t,’ he muttered, as he ducked the ship out of the other craft’s trajectory.

The noise of a blast shook the ship. They were being fired upon.

There was a sputtering noise as Clarence fired a retaliatory burst from the ship’s defensive machine guns, controlled from a panel at the rear of the cockpit. ‘I think I might have hit one of them,’ the angel said proudly.

The dogfight continued for more than a minute, and although Cwej was holding his own pretty well, he would be extremely lucky if he got out of this skirmish safely.

‘Come on, Chris,’ Clarence said helpfully. ‘Do something!’

Cwej ducked the ship from side to side, moving it into a zigzag pattern that he knew would be hard to hit. It was difficult adjusting to piloting the ship in an atmosphere, but

Cwej was skilled enough to know this difficulty would not be apparent to the others.

Clarence continued to fire the weapons, and Cwej decided to help him by launching a burst of energy from the rear of the ship.

‘One of the ships is down,’ announced Clarence, ‘but the other one is still tailing us.’

Cwej was relieved to hear this. ‘All right,’ he said, ‘I can probably outrun this one.’

Benny ran over to the copilot’s seat and checked the navigation computer. ‘Erm, Chris?’ she said. ‘We’re almost over Casmov. I’d better go and sort Jason out for the parachute drop. Will you be able to keep us on course?’

Cwej sighed. ‘I hope so.’

Benny ran up to Jason’s quarters and knocked hard on the door. ‘Come on, you dozy git,’ she yelled.

She opened the door and saw a yawning Jason in the middle of putting on a shirt. ‘Jesus, Benny,’ Jason was saying. ‘It feels like this whole place is falling apart. What’s going on?’

‘We’ve arrived,’ she told him, as the ship was rocked by yet another explosion. ‘And we’re in trouble.’

‘Same old, same old,’ said Jason, pulling the last of his clothes on. He reached down to pick up his backpack. ‘OK, I’m ready.’

Benny ran out of the room and down the corridor. She looked back to make sure Jason was following her, and noticed that his T-shirt was on back to front. She decided she wouldn’t mention that now. She would hate to do anything that might dampen his enthusiasm.

In a few seconds they reached the cargo bay, and Benny was greeted by the sight of Clarence holding the thick thermal suits that they would have to wear to avoid freezing during their sky dive and once they were in the snow below.

The ship shook as another bolt of energy narrowly missed it. Time was shorter than ever. Benny took the protective trousers from Clarence’s arm, whipped off her jeans, then

pulled them on. Clarence held her coat open for her, and she stuck her arms into its sleeves.

‘Cheers,’ she said. She reached up and kissed Clarence on the cheek. ‘Will you two be OK?’

Clarence smiled and nodded. ‘Don’t worry, Benny. We know exactly what we need to do.’

‘Great,’ said Benny.

She looked over to see that Jason was in the middle of zipping up his jacket. It seemed he was just about ready too.

‘I see your gallantry doesn’t extend to helping me,’ he complained to Clarence.

Benny checked she was all done up in the right places, made sure her parachute was attached to her backpack properly, then grabbed Jason’s arm. ‘Come on, you,’ she said.

Clarence pushed a few buttons and a section of the wall slid apart to reveal the atmosphere outside.

‘Are you ready?’ Benny asked Jason.

Jason nodded. ‘Let’s go.’ He paused. ‘After you, of course.’

Benny shook her head despairingly, walked to the edge of the opening, and jumped.

The ground that had been passing steadily below the *Revelation* now suddenly rushed towards her. The cold air whistled in her ears as her velocity rapidly increased, and she felt her jacket pound away at her skin as it was battered by the violent wind, wind that was freezing cold against her cheeks. The protective padding she was wearing was pretty comprehensive, but it still left a large area of her face exposed to the elements. Benny knew that by tomorrow her face would be chapped to bits. She looked up to see that Jason had jumped out too. She saw a look of intense concentration on his face, and realized that for all his complaints he was taking this mission just as seriously as she was. She glanced at the ground below, and decided it was hurtling towards her at a rather alarming rate.

No need to worry, she told herself. As long as the parachutes opened successfully, they’d be fine. Benny decided that looking at the ground was not a particularly helpful pastime, so instead she looked up to see how well

Chris was avoiding the Sultan's fighter. She realized that the *Revelation* must have been moving at an alarming rate, as both ships were nothing more than specks in the distance by now.

She decided to check the timer on her sleeve. Any second now, and they should open their parachutes.

'OK, Jason,' she called. 'Three, two, one, pull!'

She ripped the cord on the side of the jacket, and watched as Jason was thrown up higher into the air by the force of his parachute opening.

'Bastard!' she exclaimed. She kept tugging on the ripcord but still her parachute would not open. As she did so, she looked up to see that Jason was getting smaller and smaller in her vision, meaning that the ground was getting closer. 'Come on,' she urged. She ripped the cord out with all her strength, and at last the parachute flew out. She felt her body jerk upward as the parachute pulled her up, and her descent suddenly slowed. Knowing she would be able to get to the ground safely, Benny exhaled with relief.

The rest of the fall was less dramatic, and Benny found she was actually quite enjoying the view. The region was mountainous, completely covered in ice and snow, and deserted. A world away from the packed cities and marketplaces she usually spent her time in.

Finally, Benny reached the ground, and as she did so she rolled over in order to ensure a safe landing. Once her momentum had halted, she ran out of the area where Jason Would want to land, and waited.

In a few seconds she heard a muffled noise of canvas, wind and swearing that told her Jason had landed. She was not surprised at all that his arrival was far less graceful than hers.

'Ow,' she heard him say, understating his pain.

'You OK, Jason?' Benny asked. She knew he was, of course, but she also knew he would appreciate the sympathy.

'I'm fine, Benny,' he replied. 'You had me worried there, for a while.'

, 'Oh really?' Benny said defiantly. 'I wasn't worried at all. No, I was just going for dramatic effect.'

Jason smiled. 'Yeah, right.'

Benny decided to just lie where she was for a few moments to get her breath back.

'So now we find this Casmov place,' Jason was saying. 'How far is -'

Benny waited for Jason to finish his sentence. He didn't. Benny heard a strange hissing sound that she swore had not been there moments ago. 'Jason,' she said, 'I think you're leaking. Curse you, inflatable husbands!'

'Er, Benny,' Jason said fearfully. 'We're in big trouble.'

She opened her eyes, sat up, and almost jumped a mile.

'Bloody hell,' she exclaimed, and recoiled with a start. Surrounding them was a group of long, sluglike creatures, each covered in a metallic white skin. 'Arctic serpents,' she reclaimed. 'Just what we need - the most camouflaged animals on the planet.' Benny sighed. 'No wonder we didn't spot them from the air.'

Benny remembered the reason why people rarely came out this far on their own. The serpents were famous for the terrifying way they killed their prey. Not only would one of their bites release a deadly paralysing toxin, but they hunted in packs to ensure their prey couldn't get away. Benny did a quick head count. There seemed to be about twelve of the buggers.

'Jason, have you got any weapons in that backpack of yours?'

Jason nodded. 'A couple.'

'Well, get them out.'

Jason reached behind him to loosen the straps of his backpack, but he lost his grip and the backpack crashed to the floor. Three of the serpents rushed for him.

He jumped back with shock and shuffled over to Benny's side. The serpents paused where they were, as if deciding how to proceed. It was as if they were toying with the humans. They had surrounded the couple completely, but were just sitting in the snow, their sharp-toothed mouths

hanging open, drooling in the breeze. Several of the serpents had moved to a position where their bodies were partially upright, poised to attack.

‘So much for the weapons,’ Benny sighed. ‘Any sudden moves and we’re finished.’

Benny and Jason stepped back, and the circle of serpents moved in tighter. Benny stared up into the sky in the vague hope that some form of air rescue would be forthcoming, but the skies were clear.

Benny reached over, took Jason’s hand in hers, squeezed it tightly, and waited for the serpents to strike.

FALLING ANGELS

Dawn broke over the basin. Light flooded the place where once water had stretched to the horizon. Now there was no water, no plants, no life. Just dust and bones, the dried-out roots of pondweed. The remains of life lost. A broken boat hut was crumpled into a mass of twisted planks. The old jetty seemed like a bridge to nowhere, sticking out into midair.

At the edge of the dried-out lake sat a young man. He remembered how it had once been, before the gods came. The water had glistened like silver, fish streaking beneath the surface. In the winter couples had walked the path that stretched around the lake, cuddling up close to each other and watching the little birds slip and slide on the ice. In the summer children had played, and whole families had pushed boats out on to the lake, or swum in the cool water to shake off the midday heat. During public holidays it had seemed that most of the population of Tashwari had travelled out to the lake, the people of the city hungry for a bit of natural beauty.

And now it was all gone. The gods had come and everything had changed beyond recognition. The young man put his head in his hands and cried.

Maande found the young man collapsed with emotion, curled into himself and gripped by convulsive sobs. His head was buried in his lap. In spite of herself, in spite of the fact that she was being pursued, she felt the need to stop. Chances were that the young guy was another victim of divine intervention, another human life needlessly shattered by the gods. If so, he was a potential ally, maybe even a recruit. Gun by her side, she stepped closer to him.

‘Hello,’ she said gently, knowing that this could be a critical moment in his transition from faith into reality. ‘Why are you crying?’

‘The lake,’ he said. ‘It has changed so much, everything has changed here.’ His voice was muffled, he wasn’t even looking at her, his arms still wrapped defensively around the lower half of his face. Only his red, watery eyes were visible, staring out across the dead landscape.

Maande followed his gaze. The view was desolate, enough to send most people into despair. But Maande wasn’t most people, and she had seen worse horrors. Far worse. Nevertheless, such sentiments would be of no use to her at the moment.

‘It’s a tragedy,’ Maande said, as sympathetically as she could. And she believed it, but knew that it was only one part of a bigger tragedy.

‘A tragedy?’ the young man echoed, hysteria in his voice. His eyes spun around to her now, wild. ‘A tragedy? This is no tragedy.’ He jumped to his feet, and Maande could see his expression of rapture, the grin on his face. He was crying with joy, overwhelmed by ecstasy. ‘This is beautiful! To see a place like this so transfigured is a miracle, one only the gods could provide. See the wonder of their power!’

‘Yes,’ said Maande wearily. ‘I see it all right.’

She raised her gun to shoulder height and shot him through the head. The body crumpled to the dusty ground, rolling slightly down the bank. She looked at the corpse, what remained of his face still twisted into insane delight. Hopeless. He was better off dead. She was distracted from such morbid thoughts as the roar of engines filled the air. Maande looked up to see some kind of ship, shooting across the sky. It left no vapour trail, but a stream of multicoloured spatial distortion followed in its path. As Maande watched, two tiny shapes detached themselves from the ship, trailing their way down through the morning sky.

An air drop! Maande didn’t know what it could be - supplies, troops? Maybe even some of the gods’ followers, going through some obscure ritual. Perhaps it was suicide.

Whatever was happening she had to find out. Gun raised, she began to run towards where she thought the landing site might be, jumping over rubble and dried-out hedges when they obscured her path. Looking up, she could make out shapes now. Both were clearly humanoid figures, silhouetted in the crisp dawn sunlight. One opened up a chute, and was jerked upward, its descent slowed. The other -

The other -

The other seemed to have *wings*. She stopped, skidding on the dusty ground, and looked again. As the figure got closer - and it seemed it had spotted her, and was deliberately swooping towards her - she realized her first instinct had been right. They weren't even some kind of artificial-flight wings, but actual, feathered bird-wings. On a stunningly handsome human male wearing simple red robes. An angel.

And angels served the gods, didn't they? She shook her head. Another threat, obviously. She couldn't allow herself to be seduced by the beautiful servants the gods conjured up any more than she could let their beguiling words draw her into their orbit. She raised her gun, letting the angel get into range, and fired.

The first shot went wide, and she saw the angel swerve back in shock, his wings flapping desperately. The second should have been right on target, but he dodged it at incredible speed, a manoeuvre no human could manage. Well, he wasn't human, was he? She fired again, but he managed to dodge that shot too. Maande tried to hit him another couple of times, but it just wasn't working. He was too fast; it was pathetically easy for him to avoid her fire. Once he seemed to overcome his initial shock at being fired at, he almost seemed to enjoy it, treating the whole business like a game, ducking and weaving in increasingly skilful and playful ways. Maande began to suspect he was playing around with her for a reason, but she couldn't figure out what that might be.

She was puzzling over the issue when someone landed on her from above, knocking the wind out of her and sending her gun flying.

As Chris and the girl disappeared under folds of parachute, Clarence congratulated himself on the beginnings of a successful partnership. He liked Chris a lot - it was actually very hard to actively dislike Chris Cwej - but he hadn't been envying the prospect of having to complete such an important mission in the company of someone who allied himself with the opposition. Clarence had been taught that their rivals were untrustworthy, ruthless and dull, and, although none of these things seemed apparent in Chris, it was hard to unlearn old warnings. But, as soon as the girl had proved a threat, Chris and Clarence had started acting as a unit, one distracting her while the other crept up behind. Or, in this case, from above.

Clarence drifted to the ground, boots crunching on the rocky surface. He picked up the girl's gun and examined it. Basic percussion weapon. With only one power station left on the planet, he doubted many people would be able to recharge energy weapons enough to make them viable.

The parachute began to move, lumps shifting beneath its shimmering surface. Two shapes bumped into each other, and there were a series of squeals and thumping sounds, before the canvas was thrown back.

'Now,' said Chris, aiming his own gun at the snarling girl's head. 'Will you please *be nice*.'

'Why the hell should I?' she demanded. 'If you're with him, you're with the gods. And if you're with the gods you can fuck right off.'

'What a charming turn of phrase,' said Chris dryly.

'So *that* was why you were shooting me,' said Clarence. 'You thought I was with the gods. Why would you jump to that conclusion?'

'Er, isn't it obvious?' the girl said, making a mime of Clarence's wings.

'Oh, that,' said Clarence. 'This is an artificial body. I was just made this way as a kind of joke, by a big computer called God.'

'Is he for real?' the girl asked Chris, pointing with her thumb at Clarence.

'Yes,' replied Chris. 'In an artificial sort of way. Now, if you'll stop trying to rip my lungs out, I'll explain why we're here. I'm Cwej, and the guy with the pillow dealership on his back is Clarence.' He lowered his gun experimentally.

'I'm Maande,' said the girl, relaxing. 'And if you're not with the gods, we better get going.'

'Why?' asked Clarence.

'Because,' said Maande, 'before I got distracted by you two, I was busy being hunted to death by a whole load of people.'

'What sort of people?' asked Clarence, as inquisitive as ever.

'*That* sort of people!' exclaimed Maande, pointing to the baying mob who were just charging into view over the horizon. There were about twenty of them, men and women of various species, your typical search-party-stroke-lynch-mob. Although they didn't have any burning torches, it being broad daylight, pitchforks were much in evidence. As were firearms, a few bullets whacking into the ground around them, spraying up little bursts of dust.

'They're trying to kill me,' said Maande, rather unnecessarily under the circumstances.

'If you shoot at everyone first time you meet them, what do you expect?' blurted Chris.

'I have every right to be paranoid,' snapped Maande. 'It was bastards like these who caused the death of my parents.'

'I'm sorry,' said Chris, momentarily frozen by sympathy. He soon got his reactions back when another bullet whizzed past his ear.

'Look, we're really sorry about your family,' said Clarence hurriedly. 'But shouldn't we be escaping in some way?'

Maande snapped out of her anger. 'Over the next hill, there's an old skimmer depot. It *might* not have been looted yet.'

'That'll do,' said Chris. 'Maybe we can get some transport from there. Want to provide some distraction, Clarence?' he

asked as they started running. 'This might be a steep climb and I think we'll need a couple more minutes.'

'On to it,' said Clarence, eagerly beating his wings as he lifted off. The mob were indeed getting dangerously close, but they momentarily ground to a halt as Clarence hovered before them, wings beating majestically in the morning sun. They seemed awe-struck.

'I come in the name of the gods,' boomed Clarence, trying to sound as authoritative and spectral as possible. He had a horrid feeling he wasn't very good at this sort of thing, in spite of his intimidating appearance. 'Lay down your weapons and kneel.'

'No,' said someone at the back of the mob. 'Kill the infidel, the false prophet!'

'Yeah,' said another rabble-rouser. 'Slaughter the winged demon!'

'Well, it was worth a try,' muttered Clarence as bullets, rocks and even a few small gardening implements were sent in his direction. 'Right, if you want to play it that way.' He swooped down on them, weaving and dodging to avoid various projectiles. He folded up his wings, hitting the front of the crowd like a bowling ball, sending six or so people flying off their feet. The mob scattered briefly, spinning out of his way, but as he rolled on to his feet some of the braver ones were already coming for him. He used the back of his hand to slap aside a woman with an axe, then kicked a man with a gun in the gut. Two or three people tried to rush him at once, so Clarence picked up a fat man from where he had fallen and threw him at his comrades, knocking them to the ground. Glancing behind him, Clarence could see that Chris and Maande had almost reached the top of the hill.

'Thanks for the workout,' said Clarence, grabbing a rifle from one of the mob and whacking the bearer in the face with it, Clarence spread his wings, and lifted off. 'We must do it again sometime.'

Cwej and Maande soon found that going down the other side of the hill was far easier than going up. They half slid, half

tumbled down to the bottom, and hit the flat ground running. By a roadside sat a large warehouse, which Cwej presumed was the skimmer depot Maande was looking for.

'You know,' said Maande, panting with the exertion, 'you're in pretty good shape for a short, fat guy.'

'Cheers,' said Cwej. 'Inside me there's a tall, muscular blond guy who still thinks he's going to get out again someday.' Although he wasn't looking directly at her - he was too busy concentrating on making a beeline for the warehouse - Cwej could just imagine the frown spreading across Maande's forehead, the confused expression in her eyes.

He smiled to himself.

A shadow fell over them, accompanied by a rhythmic beating sound. Clarence floated down next to them, matching their pace with sickening ease.

'I believe I've given you enough time,' said the angel cheekily. 'Don't tell me you *still* can't make it!'

'Bite me, Condorman,' snapped Cwej tetchily. 'Tell me, is that door we're running towards open?'

Clarence narrowed his eyes, his vision zooming in on the door in question. 'Looks locked to me. Padlock, chains, dead centre.'

'Thank you,' said Cwej.

'What? Why?' said Maande, increasingly baffled.

'Watch and learn,' said Cwej, raising his gun and flicking it to explosive-projectile mode. 'Both of you.'

A couple of rounds and the door flew open.

'Nice shot,' said Maande.

'Saved valuable seconds,' said Cwej, diving through the open door as the mob reached the top of the hill, unleashing another assault. 'Do these people never give up?'

'No, they're fanatical,' said Maande with heavy sarcasm. 'Otherwise they wouldn't make for very good fanatics, would they?'

'This is all very fascinating,' said Clarence, closing the door and jamming it shut with a loose fender from the scrap pile

in the corner. 'But could you guys please choose a vehicle so we can get out of here?'

'Fair point,' said Cwej, turning his attention to the skimmers before him. There were half a dozen, all green with white stripes, the livery of a tourist hire service. Cwej wandered up and down, occasionally giving one an experimental kick.

'Sorry,' said the angel. 'What can I say? He's obsessive about his toys. You know what boys are like.'

'Not really,' said Maande coldly.

'Well, strictly speaking, neither do I. But I'm sure you get the idea.'

Cwej allowed himself a smile at the conversation happening behind him. 'This one,' he said, slapping the bonnet of a skimmer seemingly identical to all the others. 'It has character. Clarence, get ready to open the doors. Maande, find anything worth stealing. I'm going to hot-wire this baby.'

Outside, the leader of the rabble directed his troops.

'We must get in there!' he seethed, not one to underplay his bombastic role. 'The infidels must be destroyed!'

'There are only two entrances,' one of the mob reported back. 'This door, and the main vehicle exit. Both are barred to us.'

'Argh!' exclaimed the leader, punching his disappointing subordinate in the head. 'The gods will not favour those who fail them.' He looked around, desperate for a plan. His eyes alighted on a pile of fuel barrels at one corner of the building. He stroked his beard thoughtfully, before turning to the rest of the mob. 'Take those barrels and pour the contents over and around the walls. If we cannot have the pleasure of pulling the heretics limb from limb, we can at least have the satisfaction of hearing their screams as they burn in righteous flame!'

The crowd cheered and got to work. The leader watched them, as his subordinate pulled himself to his feet, rubbing his aching head. His eyes widened when he saw the markings on the barrels.

Wait a minute,' he said, panicking. 'That's Bantuthol, the galaxy's best-loved accelerant. You can't -'

His words were broken off as his leader punched him to the floor once more.

"Can't" is not in my vocabulary,' he boomed.

'Neither is "restraint",' muttered the underling, nursing his head as he crawled away from his leader. He didn't want to be nearby when the match was struck...

Clarence looked down at his feet. Liquid was pooling around his boots. He knelt down, touched his fingers against it, then sniffed his fingertips. Fuel of some kind, and it had seeped in under the door.

'That was not a valid operation,' said a mechanical female voice from the other side of the room.

'Hey, Chris,' said Clarence. 'You'd better hurry up. I think they're about to try to bum us out.'

'Code rejected. Please try again.'

There was a stream of swearwords from Chris, whose head was stuck under the dashboard of the skimmer.

'Do not do that again,' said the female voice. 'Tampering with parts may invalidate this product's warranty.'

'Nothing,' said Maande, emerging from the office. 'Just some stale doughnuts, and no one's hungry enough to eat rancid plum jam.'

'Right,' said Clarence, hand on the switch that would automatically lift the vehicle bay doors. 'Get in the skimmer. As soon as Chris gets that thing started, I want you out of here. I'll catch you up and drop in through the sunroof.'

'This unit has been tampered with,' said the skimmer. 'Please contact your retailer to arrange a replacement.'

The leader of the mob stepped closer to the building - but not too close. After all, he didn't want his eyebrows blasted off when it went up. The mob had assembled near both sets of doors, so as to beat the heretics to the ground if they tried to escape. Their leader noticed that his most useless underling

had disappeared somewhere. Probably cowering from the mighty wrath of his illustrious master, the feeble wretch.

He slid a box of matches out of his pocket: BOWMAN'S EVERLASTING: THE FLAME THAT NEVER DIES. Whoever invented those must have made a fortune. He pulled one of the little sticks from the box and struck it against the rough patch down the side. It flared into life, resplendent. He lifted the match for the mob to see.

'Observe the inevitable death of all those who defy the -'

His hyperbole was cut off as the vehicle entrance shot open, and a skimmer flew out, causing the mob to scatter. Seconds later, a winged figure zoomed after it, giving him a cheeky salute on the way.

'Grrrargh!' shouted the leader, petulantly shaking his fist at the fleeing trio. He carelessly threw the match aside.

Still lit, it bounced off a wall and dropped to the ground, landing in a patch of fuel.

'Shit!' exclaimed Chris as the skimmer was rocked by the blast behind them. Maande turned, holding her hand up against the glare. Peeking between her fingers she could see that the entire depot had been destroyed in a vast fireball, which had devastated an area of around twenty metres either side of the flattened building. A mushroom cloud of thick, dark smoke floated over the ruins, while chunks of masonry and barbecued fanatic dropped from the sky all around.

'Guess they underestimated the blast radius,' said Maande, shrugging.

'Well, that stuff isn't petroleum,' agreed Chris, slapping his head with the heel of his hand. 'Damn, my ears are still ringing.'

'Huh, you think you've got it rough,' said Clarence, pulling himself head first through the sunroof. 'I've singed my wingtips, and nearly got hit by a badly charred leg.'

When Clarence had settled in the back seat, Maande could feel the attention of both men on her. They were driving smoothly now, Chris using the navicom to find the way to

Tashwari. She didn't know what to say about that, but kept a hand close to her pistol just in case.

'So,' said Chris tentatively. 'Exactly why did we just have In rescue you from a rampaging mob?'

'It's a long story,' said Maande. And she told them.

Back before the rise of the gods, there was a time of delightful mundanity, of soothing routine. Dellah was a different world back then, a normal world, where people shopped, worried about their insurance premiums, took their kids to school. Occasionally they might turn their thoughts to higher questions: the possibility of a god, the meaning of life, the nature of good and evil. But generally they had been too busy living those lives to waste time working out what it all might mean. Maande and her family had lived, loved and argued on that Dellah, lived their normal lives, which, in hindsight, seemed idyllic. The suburbs of Tashwari had been a peaceful place, the Sultan a benevolent ruler.

Then, almost overnight, everything changed. The gods had arrived, and the Sultan was soon converted. The Obligatory Faith Declaration was introduced, and Maande and her family felt themselves drawn to Mor'yuchi, a Tashwaran god known for bringing abundance. Blanketed by the faith, they were happy to watch as others were sacrificed so that they might have plenty. The faithful indulged themselves while the faithless were made to suffer. Behind Mor'yuchi's mind barrier, at the heart of the city, a dwindling number of the faithful gathered around the Sultan's Palace.

It was while outside the mind barrier, in the outskirts where the influences of those other than Mor'yuchi could be felt, that Maande was hit by the great wave of unbelief that spread across Dellah, bringing chaos in its wake.

'The ship,' said Chris. 'It was a ship, infected with a psychically transmittable, faith-eroding virus. It was crashed on Dellah to try to loosen the gods' grip.'

‘So someone still remembers we’re here?’ Maande said, amazed. ‘We never knew. We just presumed that everyone had forgotten about Dellah.’

‘They’d like to,’ said Clarence. ‘But the gods are too much of a threat to the rest of human-occupied space.’

‘Who are you people, anyway?’ asked Maande. ‘Why are you here?’

‘We’re a group connected to some of the refugees from St Oscar’s,’ said Chris. ‘And we’re here to check out the situation in Tashwari.’

‘Are you nuts?’ said Maande. ‘That’s the heart of the Mor’yuchi Circle. The Sultan’s New Moral Army troops constantly patrol the city. All you’ll find there is pain, death and the Mor’yuchi followers’ stupid sacrifices.’

‘Sacrifices?’ said Clarence.

Maande took a deep breath. ‘I tried to hide my lack of faith from my family, but eventually they found out. They saw it as their failure. They killed themselves, thinking it might redeem them in Mor’yuchi’s eyes.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Clarence quietly.

‘I’m not,’ said Maande bluntly. ‘They showed me the way. It’s better to be dead than live in a place like Tashwari serving their idiot god with his foul excesses. I’ve been bringing that little bit of enlightenment to people ever since.’

There was a pause as this sank in.

‘You mean you kill people?’ said Chris. ‘Anyone who believes in the gods?’

‘If I can get away with it, yes,’ said Maande coldly. ‘It would be nice to drop another of your magic flu bugs into the mix and free everyone like that, but far too many people are way, way too far gone for that. A bullet in the head is the only scripture worth reading for them.’

‘So that’s why the mob were after you,’ said Clarence. ‘They caught you blowing someone’s brains out?’

‘Yes,’ said Maande flatly.

There was another difficult pause.

‘Look,’ said Maande. ‘If you’re against the gods then I’ll help you do whatever you’re doing. I’ll even head into Tashwari with you, if that’s what you’re doing.’

‘Good job,’ said Chris. ‘We’re already there.’

They abandoned the skimmer at the outskirts of the city, Maande having claimed it was far too large to avoid being targeted by the NMA’s tanks. Clarence had learnt a degree of cynicism over the last couple of years - being with Benny tended to involve meeting the least trustworthy of people - but he found himself trusting Maande nonetheless. She was a killer, for sure, but who wouldn’t be under such circumstances? He couldn’t judge her: he was an artificial creation, barely a few years old. He had never had to live or suffer. Besides, he had been given hints of Chris’s recent activities that made Maande’s actions seem like trivial misdemeanours by comparison.

His trust was vindicated by the presence of NMA troops on street corners, the need to constantly evade checkpoints and patrols as they proceeded on foot. Clarence tightened his robes around him, sword and wings safely hidden. There were signs of the escalated conflict since the belief-sapping virus had set the gods at each other’s throats, vying for control of the faithful. Buildings were bombed out, blood was spattered against walls and across pavements. On occasional patches of common land, simple graves had been dug. Rows of crosses filled one street, the remains of unbelievers pinned to every one.

When Chris had said they wanted to get as close to the centre as possible, Maande had insisted they stop off at a resistance safe house along the way, to gather recent intelligence and possibly support for their infiltration mission. Chris had argued against this, but Maande had been adamant. She wasn’t going to go to the palace unprepared.

The damage to buildings decreased as they got closer to Mor’yuchi’s mind barrier. Here life seemed more normal, as the Sultan’s loyal followers lived their lives safely, protect

from reality, in exchange for total obedience to their lord. The NMA presence was also far less blatant, and they began to pass people in the street. They found themselves relaxing. Eventually, they reached a street where all the houses were intact, almost in the shadow of the Sultan's palace. All except one.

'Let me guess,' said Chris resignedly. 'That's it, isn't it?'

'Yeah,' said Maande, breaking into a run. Chris followed, and Clarence tried to keep up without his wings showing.

'Damn,' said Maande, looking in through a broken window. 'This wasn't done by the NMA. This was the work of the locals. They must have realized what the house was being used for.'

They found bodies throughout the house, five people beaten to death, probably with basic clubs. One had a kitchen knife stuck in his chest. All of the dead seemed dressed for bed; most were slaughtered in their bedrooms. One had got halfway down the stairs before being brought down. It seemed the neighbours had struck at dawn, to rid their street of heretics before they could fight back.

'Shit,' said Maande. 'This just gets worse.'

'Look,' said Clarence, a suspicion growing in his mind. 'If the people here are so perceptive, don't you think they're going to be wary of us hanging around in here?'

Chris and Maande looked at each other in panic, just as a smoke bomb bounced through the window. Eye-stinging gas filled the room.

'Tear gas,' shouted Chris. 'Out!'

They ran, mouths and noses covered, charging out of the front door. Chris and Maande were more badly affected by the gas than Clarence, who was capable of withstanding far harsher environments. So, while they rolled around coughing, Clarence was already aware of the severity of the situation, lie was staring down a selection of gun barrels. Holding those guns were the troops of the Sultan's New Moral Army, In their green fatigues. Behind them, a couple of tanks had pulled up, heavy artillery aimed at the three intruders.

The New Moral Army, paramilitary enforcers of the religious order. They didn't mess about.

Maande pulled herself to her feet, squinting through tear-stung eyes to try to find someone in charge. 'Fool, you could have killed me with that gas bomb.' The captain of the New Moral Army patrol seemed too shocked to reply. 'I'm a registered member of the Mor'yuchi Circle, a respected member of the blessed faithful.' She turned, pointing at Chris and Clarence. 'I have brought these foolish infidels for you.'

Wearily, Chris and Clarence raised their hands in surrender. Clarence realized that, perhaps, he was as gullible as everyone made out after all.

'For us?' said the NMA captain. 'What the hell do we want with these losers?'

Maande seemed rather nonplussed by this. 'They are unbelievers!' she declared. 'Heretics! They must be put into slavery for their sins.'

The captain rubbed his chin. 'Well, I suppose the Sultan could always do with a couple more servants. Our new god, Tehke... he seems to demand so many sacrifices. We can barely keep up the supply of heretics for the burners.'

'So,' said Maande, almost to herself. 'The Sultan serves Tehke now.'

The captain's eyes narrowed in suspicion. 'Yeah, this is Tehke's city now - what of it? You better get back to your god, Mor'yuchi follower. We're at truce with him now, but soon there will only be room for one god.'

'Whatever,' said Maande, backing away slowly. Several NMA guns traced her retreat.

'And as for you two,' said the captain, turning to Chris and Clarence. 'It looks like you're on your way to the Sultan's palace.'

'Oh dear,' said Chris, in mock regret.

'Yeah,' added Clarence. 'What a shame.'

THE HIDDEN CITY

Benny watched helplessly as one of the serpents lunged for Jason's arm. Jason slammed his fist down on its head, knocking it out of his way. The serpent slowed, as if stunned, then returned to the rest of the pack, seemingly ready to attack once more.

'Jason!' Benny shouted. 'What are you doing? If that thing bites you...'

Jason shot her a pained look. 'Like not hitting it would have helped things!'

The serpents closed in, and suddenly attacked.

The crack of a gunshot shook through the air, and the serpents crashed to the ground in fear. One of them had brushed Benny briefly, but none of them appeared to have bitten her.

Benny heard another shot, but this time it was followed by a loud growling that filled the air and mingled with the sound of the icy wind. It was the unmistakable roar of a large animal. The serpents seemed scared by the noise, and slithered back quickly. They all turned to face the ground, then burrowed into the ice, disappearing from view.

Benny saw a shape emerging from the icy mist, several metres away. It was a junlagi, a large pack animal native to the region. The junlagi was about the size of an elephant, covered in white fur with large tusks protruding from its face. On top of the beast rode a figure clad in fur-covered arctic camouflage gear. He held a large rifle, which he placed in a holster attached to the back of his coat. The junlagi stop still, and crouched down to enable the man to dismount.

'You shouldn't be out here,' the man said in a deep, booming voice. 'It's very dangerous.'

'Yeah,' shouted Jason, struggling to be heard over the noise of the snowstorm winds. 'We'd kind of noticed.'

The man crouched and placed a gloved hand on the snow. He waited for several seconds, then stood up again.

'It's OK now,' he said. 'The serpents aren't anywhere near.'

'Thank you,' said Benny. 'You probably saved our lives.'

The man shook his head in bewilderment. 'Who are you two? What are you doing here anyway?'

'We came from a shuttle,' said Jason, pointing at the sky. 'We had some trouble and had to bail out.'

The man appeared to be considering the validity of Jason's claim. 'What religion are you?' he asked.

'Erm, well that depends,' said Benny, 'on what *you* are.'

The man smiled, and reached for the holster on his back. He took out the gun and pointed it at Benny and Jason. 'I', he announced proudly, 'am an atheist.'

Benny was relieved to hear this. She just hoped he wasn't trying to trick them. Mind you, it wasn't as if they had much of a choice.

She purposefully put on a large smile, and held out her hand as if she wanted to shake his.

'So are we,' she said. 'That is, we don't worship any of the Dellahan gods.'

The man smiled. 'Wonderful. I'm from a group of people who feel that we are not yet ready for the gods to walk the planet.'

Benny hoped the man was telling the truth. If he was, then they knew for sure that there were still people on Dellah who had not succumbed to the gods' influence.

'By the way,' the man said, taking Benny's hand and shaking it, 'my name's Heldov.'

Jason reached over to Heldov and shook his hand. 'I'm Jason Kane,' he said. 'You may have heard of me. And this is my wife, Bernice Summerfield.'

'Ex-wife,' corrected Benny. 'You may have heard of me too, you know.'

The wind continued to blow violently, and Benny was becoming hoarse from shouting to be heard. If she and Jason

did not find some shelter soon, they would start to suffer frostbite.

‘Look, this is all very pleasant,’ she said, ‘but we really need to hurry up and get out of this cold.’

Heldov nodded. ‘A good plan, Bernice.’ He pointed to the junlagi. ‘There’s plenty of room up there for all of us. I’ve been out getting supplies, but the resources are scarce around here. There’s plenty of room left for you two on this thing’s back. I suppose you’ll have to come back to the city with me.’

‘I don’t know about that,’ Jason said. ‘How do we know it’s not dangerous?’

‘It’s a hidden city. We fled there after the gods arrived.’

‘Right,’ said Benny, rubbing her hands together, ‘let’s get going.’

Heldov helped Benny and Jason get on to the back of the junlagi. Once they were all secure in the creature’s saddle, Heldov made some obscure clicking sounds and the animal started to move off, into the blinding white of the snowstorm.

The junlagi moved at an extremely fast pace, seemingly unfazed by the treacherous weather conditions. Nevertheless, it still took almost forty minutes to reach their destination. The weather made conversation impossible on the journey, and Benny wondered whether they had done the right thing by putting their trust in a strange man whom they had only just met. However, the serpents were still out there, and Benny knew that, if she and Jason wanted to avoid being eaten alive, they would have to go along with the stranger.

Eventually, the junlagi came to a halt at the bottom of an icy cliff face. Heldov told Benny and Jason to stay where they were, dismounted and walked up to the wall of ice. He brushed some frost away from a section of the wall to reveal a concealed metal panel, and tapped it several times. A quiet rumbling sound began, and within seconds the ice had melted away to reveal a large, metal door. The door slid open with an echoey creaking noise. Benny peered into the space behind the doorway but could see nothing but darkness. She

guessed that if there was a city inside the cliff then it must have been carved out of the rock.

‘We’ll have to walk the rest of the way,’ said Heldov. ‘The junlagi doesn’t like carrying passengers when the light’s reduced.’

Benny and Jason extricated themselves from the junlagi’s saddle and dropped to the ground. Heldov grabbed hold of a pair of leather reins that hung around the creature’s neck and began to lead it inside the cavern. He motioned for Benny and Jason to follow him. They stepped into the darkness.

‘I can’t see a thing,’ complained Jason.

‘Hang on,’ said Heldov. A light flicked on, and Benny saw that Heldov had produced a flashlight from one of the pockets of his vast coat. ‘It’s not too far,’ he said. ‘Don’t you worry.’

Benny looked around the cavern. It reminded her of most caves she had been in on Dellah: stalactites surrounded the worn-out path they were walking along and the walls all around them emanated an eerie blue glow. Every so often, Benny swore she caught a glimpse of eyes in the darkness. She wondered what wildlife could flourish in an environment like this.

‘So,’ said Heldov, in a cheery voice, ‘tell me who you are again.’

Benny was still a bit hesitant about how much they ought to tell the man, but Jason seemed happy to fill him in on the details.

‘And so,’ Jason was saying, ‘we’ve come up with a plan that will rid the galaxy of the gods for ever.’ Jason seemed extremely smug as he said this, but by the time his sentence had finished his expression had turned to one of guilt, as if he had suddenly remembered the price the success of their mission would cost the Dellahans. Benny was amused to see Jason in this kind of situation. She had often known him to indulge in philanthropic acts, but also knew that he never usually made big concessions to other people unless there was some form of personal gain involved. She knew, too, that

he was one of the people who would be wiped out if their mission failed. Benny wondered if Jason was finding this selflessness a little hard to deal with.

She turned to look at Heldov and wondered how much of Jason's story he believed.

'You know something, young Jason,' Heldov said. 'I think you're both completely mad! I don't believe for a second that there's any way that two people such as you could get rid of a menace so powerful it threatens to place our entire system under eternal slavery.' Heldov shuffled forward and prodded Jason on the chest. 'So tell me, just how do you plan to defeat the gods?'

'That's top-secret, I'm afraid,' said Benny, butting into the conversation. 'Sorry, but we'd hate for any information to fall into the wrong hands.'

Heldov smiled. 'Of course not.'

'That is to say, er, I'm not saying you are the wrong hands or anything. It's just that... well, you know.'

'I know.'

Benny was not quite sure how to deal with this man. What do you say to someone who appears to live under a polar ice cap? Still, she thought, diversity is the spice of life. Perhaps the small-talk approach was best.

'So,' she said, 'what do you do?'

Heldov turned to look her in the eye, and then flashed his torch up towards the ceiling to illuminate the cavern. 'Why,' he said, 'I live here, of course.'

Fair enough, thought Benny. She noticed how very talkative Heldov was when asking them questions, but, now that she was the one doing the asking, he seemed to have clammed up.

Maybe it was best to throw a barrage of questions at him and see which ones stuck.

'So,' she asked, 'do you live on your own? How long have you been here? Why don't you follow the gods?'

'Well,' announced Heldov, 'I live with a group of over fifty people. We were a small village, outside Iacon City. You wouldn't have heard of it. One day, we got a visit from the

New Moral Army, telling us about these new religious restrictions. Now of course, we had a town meeting. That's what we do, you know, in situations like these. We all decided that there was more to life than serving some jumped-up aliens with delusions of grandeur, so we fled the village under the cover of darkness.'

Jason's eyes told Benny that he was enjoying this tale. 'So I guess the New Moral Army chased after you then,' he said.

'Oh, of course,' continued Heldov. 'We trekked for days, desperate to outrun them. Things were getting so tight that a large portion of our group had made up their minds to leave and find a religion.'

'Of course,' Benny said, 'you would expect that. The gods have some kind of influence that makes them impossible to resist. I'm surprised you people didn't start to convert earlier.'

'I'm not,' said Heldov confidently. 'We're a strong bunch, us villagers. I think we got away because we never actually met any of the gods, just their messengers. Heard a great deal about them, mind. It was only when one of them accompanied the NMA patrol that was searching for us that our people started to turn.'

'So you and the others who live here, you're the ones who escaped?'

Heldov chuckled. 'Well this is where things get a little peculiar.' He took a deep breath, obviously trying to make the next section of his tale sound as dramatic as possible. 'We had just made it to the Northern Islands, when the NMA finally caught up with us. Just as we were all deciding that perhaps they had a point, and that perhaps religion was the answer, a wave of confidence spread through our camp. Suddenly, everyone in the camp felt a renewed sense of defiance, and do you know what was strange?'

Benny sighed. 'What?'

'All of a sudden, the NMA seemed unable to touch us. For a short while, we felt invincible. In less than a week, we had made it up here.'

‘But why here?’ Benny wondered out loud. ‘The conditions are so treacherous.’

‘Exactly,’ a smug Heldov said. ‘It’s far too cold and miserable for the NMA to come all the way out here to find us. There’s simply not enough of us to make it worth the effort. They know that even if they found us we wouldn’t fall for their religious claptrap, so they seem to have given up their search.’ Heldov’s voice quietened in a way that seemed habitual rather than intentional. ‘Nevertheless, we don’t want to shout about this place. Wouldn’t want a flood of refugees or anything spoiling it for us. That’s why I had to keep it all a bit of a secret. Hope you don’t mind.’

Benny shook her head, and decided that they were probably on an equal footing now.

‘It seems we both have secrets to keep,’ she said. ‘You can dust us.’

Heldov grinned, then nodded his head. ‘Likewise, Bernice.’

The junlagi, which had been very quiet and well behaved up until this point, suddenly let out a long groan.

‘Is that thing OK?’ Jason asked.

‘Aye.’ Heldov nodded. ‘It’s just telling me to stop jabbering on like a loon. We’re almost at the city, you know. Just around the corner.’

Benny was not quite sure what to expect from Heldov’s promises. If the story of his village’s exodus from the gods was true, then the settlement should be little more than a few tents and makeshift structures. As they turned the corner and saw the city for the first time, Benny realized that her assumptions had been rather rash.

From the outside, the city appeared to be barely bigger than a small village, but what buildings there were looked spectacular. A bright, golden light spread from within the crystalline structures, creating the illusion of a million candles flickering, lighting up the darkness. Benny could see why Heldov insisted on calling the place a city. It really was one of the most beautiful places Benny had ever seen, and the word ‘village’ just didn’t seem appropriate. After all, Dorothy never found the Emerald Village, did she?

‘Come on,’ said Heldov. ‘Let’s get inside.’

Heldov led them along a tiny corridor, which eventually opened out into a large room where a dozen people – Benny assumed they were villagers – sat on wooden chairs around a burning log fire. The walls of the room appeared to be made of a greenish-blue stone, and all around were shelves containing rows of vases and porcelain creatures.

‘You’ve got some serious talent here,’ Benny said, pointing to the vases.

‘Thank you,’ said Heldov proudly. ‘I made them all myself.’

Heldov shot Benny an expression that said, ‘That’s right, look impressed.’ And she was. Heldov clapped his hands loudly, to get the villagers’ attention. They turned to look at him, and Benny was sure that she heard several of them gasp as they saw that he had brought strangers to the city.

‘Everybody,’ said Heldov, his voice booming around the cavern, ‘I want you to meet our guests.’

A short, grey-haired woman stood up from her place next to the fire and scuttled over to Heldov.

‘Are you mad?’ she yelled. ‘Carry on like this and the whole world will know where we are. The gods will catch us for sure.’

‘Sekari,’ Heldov said. ‘I’d like you to meet Bernice and Jason.’ He pointed at his two guests, then pointed to the woman. ‘This’, he told Benny, ‘is my wife, Sekari.’

‘Hello,’ said Benny in her most friendly tone. ‘We’re so pleased to meet you. Please, don’t be alarmed by us. I assure you, we hate the gods as much as you do.’

Sekari looked doubtful and appeared to be considering whether to give them the benefit of the doubt.

‘It’s true, my dear,’ Heldov assured her. ‘I found them out in the cold. The poor things might have frozen to death if I hadn’t brought them back.’

‘We really do appreciate your husband’s generosity,’ chipped in Benny. ‘We promise we’ll tell no one where you are.’

‘Right,’ said Sekari snidely. The woman’s brash and rude manner indicated that she had real problems with strangers.

'I hope you'll understand that I can't trust you yet. You would be as cynical as I am if you had lived through half of what I have.'

Benny was used to dealing with people like this. The staff at the students' union had displayed just this sort of attitude. 'It's OK,' Benny said. 'I understand.'

'Nevertheless,' Sekari continued aggressively, 'you're here now, and any damage has already been done.'

'Well sorry for breathing,' said Benny petulantly, losing her patience with the woman.

'Look, we're going to have to assume you're telling the truth.' The woman sighed heavily. 'I don't like it, but there's nothing I can do about it.'

Sekari looked up at Benny like a grounded teenager looking at her parents. 'Welcome to Kasakech,' she said reluctantly.

Benny reached out her hand and was pleased when Sekari shook it.

'Great,' said Benny. 'Now we're all friends, how about letting me and Jason share your fire? I'm bloody cold, you know.'

'Of course!' exclaimed Heldov. 'Where are my manners?'

A short while later, Benny and Jason had begun to feel settled with the villagers around the fire. Someone had given them a mug of hot coffee each which Benny was pleased to realize contained a kick of brandy. Another person had provided blankets for the visitors. She was also pleased to see that Sekari seemed to be thawing somewhat. Benny guessed she was the kind of person she could get on her side quite easily, even if she was paranoid about strangers.

'This place is great,' Jason was saying. 'Did you build it yourselves?'

'No,' said Sekari. 'Of course not. We believe the cavern is natural. The houses were built about five hundred years ago by the people that used to inhabit the area. They're all gone now, of course, but their city remains.'

'So they built it 'cos it was out of the cold, and you moved in 'cos it was out of the way of the gods?'

‘Exactly, Jason. Heldov discovered it while on an archaeological expedition over twenty years ago.’

‘You’re an archaeologist!’ exclaimed Benny, looking at Heldov. ‘Fantastic! So am I!’ Benny noticed Jason’s eyes roll in disdain. She could tell that he was thinking, Here we go again.

Benny realized that Heldov was looking at her peculiarly, as if he was thinking that perhaps he ought to know her.

‘It’s all right,’ she reassured him. ‘We’ve never met before today. I teach archaeology at St Oscar’s. Or at least I did. I’m relatively new there, though, compared with some of the old crusties in the department.’

‘Aah,’ said Heldov. ‘No wonder. I’ve been out of the loop for rather a long time, I’m afraid. I used to be a keen scholar - Centennial College graduate, no less - but I’ve been rather slack on this side of things since the late seventies. I haven’t been near an archaeological publication or department for years. I’ve found that I haven’t really had as much time for archaeology as I did in the past since I discovered the joys of pottery.’

‘Right you are,’ said Benny. ‘I get you.’

‘That and having to bring up this bloody big family of mine.’ Heldov let out a hearty chuckle. ‘You say you’re from St Oscar’s, then?’ Benny nodded. ‘Good, good,’ said Heldov. ‘You must know Gruat.’

‘Gruat?’ said Benny. ‘Is he here?’

The villagers began to laugh among themselves. ‘Of course he’s here,’ Heldov said. ‘He’s the man we elected as our governor. He’s our leader, if you like.’

Benny shook her head in disbelief. Who would have thought it? Old Gruat, the strong but quiet librarian. She knew he lived out in a village somewhere, but had never learnt exactly where until now. In her time at St Oscar’s she had grown quite fond of the old chap. He had always been extremely helpful to Benny, and she had learnt to appreciate his wicked sense of humour. She had assumed that he had been killed by the gods when the university was destroyed. A feeling of hope stirred in Benny, as she realized that, if Gruat

had escaped, then maybe some of the rest of the university Half had too.

‘Meil?’ said Heldov to a girl of about thirteen who was sitting by the fire. ‘Run and tell your father about our guests, can you? Tell him that he knows them.’ The little girl nodded, hitched herself down from her chair and scuttled off along one of the corridors that led from the chamber.

‘So that’s Meil,’ said Benny. ‘Gruat’s told me a lot about her.’

Sekari smiled. ‘He’s very proud of her. It’s for the future of kids like that that we’re holed up in this place.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Benny.

Sekari shrugged. ‘We’re not leaving this place until the gods have left and things are back to normal. We made that decision, and we’re sticking to it. Whatever happens to us, it’s better than being a mindless slave to the state. We go back, and we become slaves. Either that or the firing squad will get us.’

‘So, Jason,’ Heldov said, obviously trying to cheer things up somewhat. ‘What made you want to leave a fine young thing like Bernice here?’

Jason sat up sharply, and Benny found that she did exactly the same thing herself. She was so switched on to small-talk mode, that she was caught off guard by a personal question like that.

Jason put his hands up in the air. ‘Not guilty, guv’nor,’ he said. Benny purposely avoided making eye contact with Jason, but she felt his gaze focusing on her. An uncomfortable silence followed, broken by Heldov clearing his throat.

‘I know your plan is secret,’ he said, ‘but you’re going to have to leave here sometime, and there’s no way you can get very far without my help.’

‘Thank you,’ said Benny. ‘That’s very kind of you.’

‘Have you heard of Casmov?’ asked Jason.

‘What, the mountain?’ chipped in a large woman sitting next to Jason.

‘Yes, the mountain,’ said Benny, taking over. ‘Or, more specifically, the power station.’ Suddenly everyone in the group moved back quickly, causing scraping sounds as they dragged their chairs over the floor. There was a brief rise in the volume level as everyone suddenly started chatting among themselves excitedly. Or was it nervously? Benny was not sure. Once Benny’s words had sunk in, they all suddenly stopped talking, and the room was filled with silence.

‘Was it something I said?’ Benny asked innocently.

Heldov looked over to one of the group, a well-built man in his late twenties, and shouted out something that Benny couldn’t make out.

The man stood up and walked over to Benny and Jason. He did not say anything, but simply stood silently. The message was quite clear. The two guests were not going anywhere. The atmosphere in the room had soured considerably.

‘You claim to be fighting against the gods,’ Heldov said, his voice raised, ‘yet you want to go to the power station at Casmov? Something is starting to smell very bad here, I’m afraid.’

‘Why?’ said Jason. ‘What’s wrong with the power station?’

‘Like you don’t know already,’ sneered Sekari, who had remained silent for most of the conversation.

‘Casmov power station’, declared Heldov, ‘is the greatest place of pilgrimage on the planet. Worse than that, it is the centre of operations for Tehke himself, the leader of the Pantheon.’

Tehke. The name chilled Benny’s blood. She had yet to encounter any of his followers since the gods had taken over Dellah, but, in the years before their reawakening, Benny had been plagued by them. Every so often they would stand out-side the university, protesting about one thing or another. One week they might be moaning about the extortionate fees non-Dellahan students had to pay to attend interstellar education, as if the university facilities could be funded by magic or something, and the next they might be complaining about the Earth Empire bombing Skaro, because of the innocent (for ‘innocent’ read ‘stupid’) people

who might be caught in the blasts. One thing, however, remained consistent on the Tehkeans' agenda. Whatever issue they were arguing about this week it was always topical, and always nowhere to be found in their religious writings. It was also always guaranteed to win them funding under the government's Freedom of Belief legislation.

Apparently, the religion was based on justice, and that fact provided the excuse for the group's actions, but anyone with half a brain (or the sense to wash and dress properly) could see that they were little more than a political organization using a religious front to get support from those who did not know better.

In fact, now she thought about it, Benny realized why the absence of Tehke had not seemed conspicuous before. She had always felt it was more of a political body than anything else. If what Heldov said was true, then the god of middleclass students with pretensions to poverty had returned.

Benny put her head in her hands. This was worse than she had feared. 'You have got to be kidding us,' she said.

'Not at all,' said Heldov, shaking his head.

'So what's Tehke like then?' Benny asked. 'In the flesh, I mean?'

Heldov looked concerned. 'You mean you don't know? You mean you haven't heard how the bastard can fry you alive with a simple stare?'

Benny shook her head. 'We haven't been around much recently. I promise, we only want to go to the power station to sabotage it.'

'What the hell is going on in here?' shouted a loud yet husky voice.

Benny turned to see a familiar, tall, white-haired man march into the room.

'Gruat!' she said excitedly.

'Hello, Bernice,' the man said, smiling. He looked at the burly man. 'Get away from her, you idiot,' he said. 'This is a friend of mine.'

The man looked rather sheepish and moved away.

'We thought they might be spies,' said Heldov.

'Listen, my friend,' said Gmat. 'I've heard a great deal about young Bernice, and that makes me think that she's probably the last person who would fall prey to becoming a mindless religious zombie.' He reached out and shook Benny's hand. 'Welcome to our city.'

Gruat turned to Heldov. 'Meil tells me it was you who brought them in. Saving them from the cold, even though they could be spies.' Gruat had a big smile on his wizened face. 'That truly was a brave thing to do, Heldov. Thank you.'

Heldov smiled, and seemed rather embarrassed over his brief lapse in faith. 'When you leave here,' Heldov said, 'myself and a few of the rest of us will join you. Whatever you are doing, you'll probably need as much help as you can get if you're going to Casmov.'

'Thank you,' said Benny. 'That would be very kind.' The crowd of people shuffled apart and Gruat sat down on a chair next to Bernice.

'It's good to see you again,' he said.

'You too,' said Benny. 'I thought you'd been killed when the university was destroyed.'

Gruat looked at her with a sad expression on his face. 'No,' he said. 'I was out shopping at the time.'

'The gods let you -'

'The gods thought I was out buying religious texts. When I got back -'

'I know,' said Benny, tenderly placing a hand on Gruat's right shoulder. 'I saw it too.'

Gruat was silent, then pulled himself up, as if about to make an announcement. 'Right,' he said, 'we've got a few spare rooms you can stay in. I assume you won't want to make a move until tomorrow?'

Benny shook her head. 'No, the darkness and the terrible weather are a bit too much - even for us. We'll make an early start tomorrow.'

Gruat smiled. 'Good. I would offer you a feast, but I'm afraid our food supplies are rather limited right now.'

'That's OK,' Benny said. 'We've got our own supplies.'

‘Good, good,’ chuckled Gruat. ‘In a minute, you can tell me why you want to go to a hellhole like Casmov, but first I want you to introduce me to your friend here.’

‘This’, announced Benny, ‘is my estranged husband, Jason Kane.’

Three hours later, most of the villagers had gone to bed. In a small, candlelit room near her quarters, Benny sat talking to Sekari over a cup of hot lemon juice.

‘I can’t believe how much I underestimated Gruat,’ Benny was saying. ‘He always seemed so nice, but I had no idea the villagers had so much respect for him, or that he had so much power over you all.’

Sekari chuckled. ‘He’s a wonderful man. In the years before the gods came, he would look after our children at weekends sometimes. ‘Tell us a story, uncle Gruat,’ they would shriek. He’s one in a million.’

She’s a frosty old fish, thought Benny, but once you get to know her she seems quite fun.

‘You’re all so brave here. So many people just wouldn’t be able to cope.’

‘Well,’ said Sekari, ‘it’s all down to Gruat’s leadership. It’s our belief in his ability to bring out the best in us. He’s put more into our community than anyone I’ve ever known.’

Benny was amazed by this. She thought she knew Gruat reasonably well after their various meetings, but their conversation had always been library- or archaeology-related, or about his children. Benny genuinely had no idea that his life outside the library was so full.

‘Do you know why none of us fell foul of the will of the gods?’ Sekari asked.

‘Why?’

‘Because of Gruat. We had such a strong faith that he would be there for us, that he could lead our community in a way that no one else could, that we had no need to put our faith in beings we had only just met.’

Benny was more impressed by the second at the resilience of these people.

‘So do you expect Gruat to find a solution to this problem? You can’t hide away in this place for ever.’

Sekari frowned, and looked extremely sad. ‘Well, time will tell. Unfortunately, I fear that Gruat will not live to see us return home.’

‘Oh God,’ said Benny. ‘Is he OK?’

Sekari shrugged. ‘He hides his illness well, but he’s dying. He was unwell for a long while, but he still had a good few years left in him. Now though... well, he suffered hypothermia on the way here, and that led to internal complications.’

Benny was sure tears were developing in Sekari’s eyes. Her voice had certainly become more strained.

‘Gruat hasn’t got more than a week or so. Two weeks at the most. He puts on a brave face, pretends he’s recovering and everything, but we all know better.’

‘That’s terrible,’ said Benny. ‘I’m so sorry.’

Sekari drained her cup and stood up unsteadily. ‘Right,’ she said. ‘I’m going to hit the sack. See you tomorrow.’

Sekari walked out of the room, and Benny decided that she too should go to bed.

Jason had retired hours ago, but for some reason Benny had just not felt tired. Probably something to do with having to save the galaxy tomorrow. It wasn’t always easy to get to sleep the night before a big day. Her mind wandered back to poor Gruat. Not for the first time, she felt angry at what the gods had done to Dellah. If Gruat’s people had not been forced out of their homes, he would never have fallen ill.

Benny began to walk down the dimly lit corridor that led to the room Gruat had lent her for the night. As she did so, she was sure she saw a figure in the distance running away from one of the rooms, in the direction of the main chamber. That was strange. She was sure everyone else was in bed by now. Why would someone be running around at this time?

‘Hello?’ she said, calling after the figure. Benny hurried down the corridor, past her room, and caught sight of the figure disappearing through a side door. She followed the figure into the room. There, standing in front of a computer terminal, was a young girl. It was Meil, Gruat’s daughter.

'Hello,' Benny said.

The girl gasped and turned around. 'You shouldn't be here,' the girl said.

'Is something the matter?' Benny asked.

'Erm, I was just...' Meil looked flustered, obviously embarrassed at being caught doing something she shouldn't be doing. The girl looked down, ashamed. She paused for a few moments, then glanced up at Benny with a look of curiosity in her eyes.

'Are you working for the NMA?' Meil asked.

'No,' said Benny. 'Of course not. Unless... hang on.' Benny moved over to the computer terminal. Meil placed her hands over the screen, but Benny gently placed her own hands on the girl's. 'It's all right,' she told Meil. 'I won't tell anyone.'

The girl looked at her in a way that told her the child was trying to assess Benny's trustworthiness. Reluctantly, Meil moved her hands away.

'Oh dear,' Benny said, as she read the message on the screen. 'This is not good.' It appeared that Meil had been in contact with the soldiers of the New Moral Army.

'You've told them about this place,' Benny said, unable to believe what she was reading. 'They're due to arrive here in the morning.' Benny looked directly into Meil's eyes. 'You've betrayed your family. Why?'

Meil shook her head and took a deep breath. 'Because of my father,' she said. 'He's dying.'

'I know,' said Benny. 'I'm sorry.'

'But do you know what the worst thing about this is?' Meil said. 'It's that he doesn't have to die. I've seen vids of the gods. Sure, they make life boring, but I've seen them perform miracles.'

There was fire in Meil's eyes, and Benny could see that the girl cared passionately about this.

'Don't you see?' Meil said. 'They can heal the sick. They can heal my dad.'

Benny was floored by this. How the hell would she follow that one? The kid had a point.

‘Meil,’ Benny said, ‘I’m sorry about your father, and I understand what you’re doing, but he’s chosen for things to happen this way. If the New Moral Army come here they’ll take away any freedom your friends have ever had. They only choose to use their powers when they want to get support. There’s no guarantee that they’ll heal your father. They’ll turn everyone into their servants.’

Meil was shaking her head. ‘No, not any more. I’ve seen what’s going on. The gods aren’t working any more. Not everyone is believing. Look at us. Look at you. A year ago we would all have fallen for the gods’ spell. No, they’re vulnerable, and I think that will work to our advantage.’

‘What will?’ said a voice from the darkness. Both Benny and Meil turned around in surprise.

Framed in the doorway was the frail shape of Gruat.

‘I saw you weren’t in your room, Meil,’ he said, ‘so I thought I’d come and see if you were all right.’

He stepped into the light and Benny saw that the expression on his face was a cheery one. Thank goodness. He clearly hadn’t heard any of the conversation Benny had just had with Meil.

‘Meil was showing me how the computers worked,’ Benny said, covering for the child. ‘We lost track of time.’

‘Ah,’ said Gruat. ‘I see.’

‘But something terrible has happened,’ Benny said. ‘I’ve been sent a message from my friends on the outside. They say that the NMA air spies saw Heldov leaving and returning earlier today.’

She found continuing difficult, as she could see Gruat’s world falling apart as she spoke. ‘It’s over, Gruat,’ she said. ‘Despite our best efforts, the NMA are coming.’

‘I see,’ said Gruat, shaking slightly. He was obviously doing his best to compose himself. ‘When will they arrive?’

‘Early tomorrow morning,’ Benny said with authority. ‘We’ve only got a few hours left. We need to start an evacuation immediately.’

Gruat nodded, clearly shocked by this unforeseen event. ‘I’ll go and start to wake people.’

Gruat left the room, and Benny and Meil followed. Benny decided to go straight to Jason's room. This was clearly going to be chaotic, and the last thing she needed was for him to go missing when he was the one carrying all the equipment for their mission.

It must have taken about three hours for everyone to leave the city. The sudden evacuation was obviously very painful for Gruat's people, but everyone had gathered together their families and belongings safely and efficiently. Benny watched the stream of people leaving the entrance to the city. For many of the villagers, this was the first time in months that they had been outside, and many were clearly relishing the fresh air in spite of the new threat to their security. Most of the villagers, including Benny, Jason and Heldov, rode on junlagis. They knew that as long as there were a few junlagis around they would be safe from the arctic serpents. Several villagers walked by the side of the animals. Babies were crying, children were complaining, but generally they appeared to be making the best of the situation. Many of the villagers were already exhausted, having been woken after only a couple of hours' sleep.

Benny was impressed that this ragtag bunch had been able to make it all this distance in the first place. This was the second time the villagers had been forced away from their homes, yet they seemed to be keeping their spirits up. Everyone she had spoken to in the city had expressed a desperate desire to return home to their village as soon as possible, but no one wanted to do so while the New Moral Army were still around. Meil's intentions had been good - the girl had wanted to save her father - but Benny feared that, even though Gruat might now be able to receive help from any remaining medical facilities, his chances of surviving the long, cold journey back were slim.

By the time everyone was safely away from the cliff face, dawn was breaking and the sky was a glorious blur of reds, purples and oranges. On the ground, however, on the vast plane over which the caravan of villagers trekked, there was

nothing but the glistening white of the snow. The weather conditions appeared to have improved: instead of the constant barrage of snow from above that they had endured the day before, a light breeze now accompanied the villagers on their journey. It looked like it was going to be a clear and sunny day. Benny hoped that this would let the villagers get to a ship, or at least somewhere warm and safe, before nightfall.

Eventually, they came to a point where something other than snow was visible in the distance. On one side of the snow flats, Benny was sure she could see the sea, and the town that the villagers were heading for. On the other, Benny could see the distant silhouette of the mountain range that Casmov was part of.

‘Bernice,’ said Heldov, who had been riding immediately behind her. ‘We need to go in a different direction from the others now if we’re going to get to Casmov in daylight.’ Benny nodded, and rode her junlagi around to where Jason was. She made sure that he was ready, and that they had all their possessions with them, then rode over to the junlagi that carried Gruat.

The old man was wrapped up in blankets and was being cradled by a woman who Benny assumed was his wife.

‘We’re going now, Gruat,’ she told him. ‘Will you be all right?’ Benny realized that this was a stupid question to ask, but she really couldn’t think of anything better to say. Gruat looked at her with a twinkle in his eye that told her he was still the same person she had known at the university, even if he was much frailer and more gaunt-looking than she remembered.

‘Goodbye, Bernice,’ the old man said. ‘We can take care of ourselves, don’t you worry.’

‘Well,’ said Benny, ‘good luck. I promise that we’ll do everything in our power to help your people.’ She lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. ‘And,’ she lied, ‘when this is over, we’ll go for a pint in the Witch.’

Gruat smiled. ‘You’re on, my friend.’

They shook hands and Benny turned to leave.

‘Whatever it is you’ve got up your sleeve,’ Gruat called after her, ‘I’m rooting for you to succeed.’

‘Thanks,’ Benny shouted back. ‘I’m going to need it!’

Benny tapped her junlagi on its side and the animal moved away. She rode over to where Jason and Heldov were waiting. Next to them stood three villagers, including one of the group Heldov had used to try to intimidate Benny the previous evening. ‘So this is our team?’ Benny said, clapping her hands together like a scout leader.

Heldov nodded towards the three men. ‘These lads have volunteered to come with us to Casmov. I’m afraid with the evacuation we haven’t been able to raise any more interest.’

‘That’s OK,’ said Benny. ‘I’m grateful you even wanted to do this. I would have thought the evacuation would have meant you all wanted to stick together.’

‘They don’t need me,’ said Heldov, shaking his head, ‘whereas you most certainly do.’ Heldov pulled the reins on his junlagi and the beast began to move off. ‘Come on,’ he shouted back to the others. ‘Are you coming or what?’ The others followed Heldov’s lead and soon they were on their way to Casmov.

After almost half an hour, Benny saw that the snakelike trail of the villagers was rapidly fading into the distance and was now barely a speck on the horizon.

‘I hope they’ll be all right,’ she said. Very soon, all the travellers could see was the snow, and the mountains.

The serene calm of the deserted ice flats was broken by the screech of a plane engine flying overhead.

‘What the hell?’ said Jason, staring into the sky. Several more planes followed the previous one, flying straight over the travellers, flying in the opposite direction to the one they were going in. The planes appeared to be flying away from Casmov.

‘I have a bad feeling about this,’ said Heldov.

Benny reached into her rucksack and took out a pair of binoculars from her supply kit. She put them to her eyes and stared up at the planes.

‘I can’t see them very well,’ she said. ‘Hang on a mo... it’s the same crowd we encountered yesterday, Jason. The Sultan’s fleet.’

She put the binoculars away and turned to the others. ‘We know the Sultan’s subservient to the gods, and Tehke’s ruling Casmov now.’

‘So the Sultan’s in league with Tehke?’ asked Jason.

‘It certainly appears that way,’ said Heldov.

Benny watched the fighters until they disappeared from view.

‘My god,’ Heldov said. ‘They’re heading in the direction of the others.’

He turned to Benny and she saw a look of panic fill his eyes. ‘We have to go back for them,’ he said. ‘We have to save them!’

‘I know,’ said Benny. She found herself unable to decide quite what to do next. The fighters had missed her party but they would certainly spot the caravan of villagers. She felt sick at the thought of them all falling prey to the whims of the New Moral Army. She was very close to deciding to go back, but then she took a look at Mount Casmov, shrouded in mist in the distance, and everything came into sharp focus. If they went back, they would probably be slaughtered along with the others. If they progressed forward, then they stood a good chance of getting revenge on these bastards once and for all. It was a fifty-fifty decision. There was no right answer. But the fate of the world was in her hands, and even more people would die if the mission was abandoned. It was her call.

‘No,’ she said sternly. ‘We have to complete this mission or we’ll all die. We must press on. We must press on.’

Keep telling yourself that, Benny, she thought. Keep telling yourself that.

THE JOURNEY TO CASMOV

The group of travellers marched steadfastly through the snowy wastes towards the distant, yet still forbidding, sight of Mount Casmov. Heldov led the party, busy making sure that his junlagi was content to endure the strain of the journey. Benny, Jason and the other villagers followed. The icy wind continued to blow in Benny's face, causing her skin to feel as if it were about to drop off. The pain the cold caused had turned to numbness, and she was learning to get used to being frozen.

They had been travelling for almost four hours, and only now could they see Casmov clearly. Before, it had simply been a mist-shrouded line on the horizon. Benny's body was telling her desperately to stop. Telling her that it could not take much more travelling. But Benny knew that they had to press on, had to reach Casmov before nightfall. That gave them less than an hour to get there. They would have to get their timings impeccably correct: one mistake, and they could find themselves trapped without shelter just as the nightly ice storm hit.

They soon arrived at a large plane where, rather than being one long, flat, continuous surface, the ice jutted out of the ground at all sorts of strange angles. Steam rushed out of small cracks in the surface, and Benny guessed that they must be over Casmov's famous geothermal vents. The imposing structure of the mountain cast a shadow over the area which made it appear as if night were about to fall.

Heldov called to his friends that they could go no further on the backs of the junlagis, and the party began to dismount. Heldov walked up to each of the animals in turn and tied their reins to a pick he had stuck into the ice. He removed

the canvas sacks from the backs of the animals and took from them several packs of food, one for each junlagi, and left them on the ground.

‘They should be safe here,’ he said. ‘Right, does everyone have their supplies?’

They all nodded. Benny found herself checking behind her to make sure that her rucksack was still attached. She’d decided that she would be responsible for all the advanced technology that had come from Braxiatel’s crowd. The rest only had to worry about mundane things like food supplies and first-aid kits.

Benny looked up at the mountain. Casmov was by no means the tallest mountain on Dellah - in fact it was little more than an enormous hill - but its sharp, craggy shape and the outline that made it look like a deformed Christmas tree meant that stories about what lay at its top had scared children for generations. Of course, once it had been discovered that there was a matrix of geothermal vents inside the mountain, the power station had been set up to mine them. As soon as people started living and working there, and as soon as a sky pod was installed to take them from the bottom of the mountain to the top, they realized that there was nothing particularly out of the ordinary about Casmov at all. The stories had soon stopped - another example of science killing myth.

Heldov shuffled over to where Benny and Jason were standing. ‘I was wondering,’ he said. ‘Might I have a word for a moment?’

‘Go ahead,’ said Jason.

‘I have been thinking,’ Heldov told them. ‘I have been thinking long and hard about the safety of this mission. And I know I was the first to announce our willingness to help you, but, well, I don’t think it’s fair to lead my fellow villagers into this.’

‘So you’re leaving us?’ Benny said.

Heldov shook his head. ‘No, Bernice. I’ll come with you. I just think some of the others should go back. It’s just not safe.’

'I understand,' said Benny.

'Thank you,' said Heldov, a smile crossing his face. 'I'll go and tell the others.'

Heldov walked back and Jason shuffled over to Benny. When he spoke, he was whispering. 'Will we be OK on our own?' he asked. 'What about the hordes of fanatics that Tehke's probably got guarding the mountain?'

'I don't know,' sighed Benny. 'Hopefully there won't be too many around. What I do know is that if we fail these people will die in vain. The least we can do is to let them enjoy the time they have left with their families.'

Jason did not look convinced. 'If they're just going to go back now, then why the hell did they come out all this way in the first place? Surely they would have been better to stay with the caravan.'

'I don't know,' said Benny. 'I suppose it's very easy to be bold when the danger's only imagined.'

She looked over to the others to see that they were all huddled together, deep in discussion. Heldov withdrew from the crowd and waved his hand to beckon her over. She walked up to Heldov with Jason following her. Heldov cleared his throat. 'It appears', he said, 'that my friends don't quite agree with me on this matter.'

'Oh?' said Benny.

'Yes, it seems that they all want to get rid of the gods so much that if you failed because of their absence they would never be able to forgive themselves.' He took a deep breath. 'In short, we're all staying.'

Benny grinned. 'Great. That's fantastic news.' She nudged Jason lightly in the ribs. 'See?' she whispered to him. 'Told you they weren't that bad.'

Heldov knelt down and reached into his rucksack. He took out the map of Casmov and laid it out on the icy floor. 'We need to be clear on exactly what we are doing,' he said

'Indeed,' said Benny. 'So where's this river, then?'

Heldov pointed to a red line that ran to the side of the mountain. 'Here,' he said. 'This river runs straight down from the mountain. It's caused by the heat inside the mountain

melting the ice. The point where the river emerges is the only known entrance to the inside of the place. We never went near it, of course, except in emergencies. The place is so hot that it was dangerous enough without the stories of sleeping giants. Those that did go inside

‘Let me guess,’ said Benny. ‘They were never quite the same again?’

‘No,’ said Heldov, shaking his head, ‘they just said that it was pretty tiring, and they would not want to go in there again.’

‘Oh,’ said Benny, slightly disappointed.

‘One thing I don’t understand,’ said Jason. ‘If there’s a bloody huge hole in the side of the mountain, how come the gods didn’t get out ages ago?’

‘We’ve no idea,’ said Heldov. ‘For years, there had been legends about giants locked up in the mountain, but no one believed them. We only found out when the gods actually arrived. People were just working away, providing power to the world, when suddenly the station was shaken by an explosion. A team went down to investigate, and found that a huge hole had been ripped in the base of the mountain. Out of which came the gods.’

‘So you saw them pretty much as soon as they were awoken?’ asked Benny.

Heldov nodded. ‘Pretty much. I was working at the station, on and off. I was several miles away at the time, but I was in constant radio communication with the station.’ Heldov’s tone of voice dropped slightly. ‘At least I had been.’

‘What happened?’ Jason asked.

‘I’m not sure exactly,’ Heldov told him. ‘I returned to the mountain to find that the cable car had been destroyed. The police took a plane up to investigate, and found literally hundreds of corpses. Apart from myself and a few others who were away at the time, everyone who worked in the station was killed.’

Benny felt awful as she watched the uncharacteristic tears building up in Heldov’s eyes. ‘How did they know it was the gods?’ she asked.

‘What, you mean apart from the prophecies about this place? Well, after exploring the plant for survivors, the police ran into Tehke himself. Three of them escaped. The others were killed. Soon after that, we heard about the Sultan of Tashwari’s declaration, and it wasn’t long before Tehke’s armies moved into the place.’

‘Great,’ said Jason. ‘Now we’ve got to find a way to get past them so we can fix down the node.’

‘Well,’ Heldov said, shrugging his shoulders, ‘we’ll just have to see how we get on, won’t we?’

Once everyone was sure that they had removed all their essential supplies from the backs of the junlagis, Benny decided to lead the way towards the mountain. She unclipped from the back of her rucksack the old hiking stick Gruat had given her, planted it in the ground and began marching forward. She glanced back, and saw that everyone was happily tagging along after her. This was the sort of incident that demanded a hiking song. Luckily, she was not the sort of woman who would sing one.

Suddenly the ground began to shake violently, and any trivialities disappeared from Benny’s mind. She stumbled forward, but managed to regain her balance.

She looked at Heldov. ‘Earth tremor?’ she asked.

Heldov nodded. ‘I think so. Either that or Old Ma Dellah’s not happy with the way her people are treating each other.’

Benny looked to see that Jason was checking that the others in the group were OK. How uncharacteristic, she thought. He was usually the hypochondriac who would feign injury to get attention.

She walked over to him. ‘You OK?’ she asked.

He nodded. ‘Oh yeah, I’m fine. I’ve been on worse roller coasters than that in my time, as you well know.’

She couldn’t help feeling slightly disappointed at his reaction. On some small level, she rather liked Jason to be a bit pathetic. It wasn’t just enormously endearing, but helped to justify her bitchy mistreatment of him. She stared at his gormlessly grinning face, and felt the metaphorical warm glow inside her, even if the air was freezing. She really hated

herself sometimes. Every time she chastised him, every time she poked fun, every time she derided his attempts to do good - each time, she felt horrible inside. This was the strange paradox of the Jason-Benny universe.

Benny knew that they had something incredibly deep between them. Did she still love him? Had she ever loved him? Don't be so stupid, Bernice, she thought. Of course you love him. But, despite all that, whenever he lamed up or did something moronic, she would make some snide comment or other. The worst thing was, she actually quite enjoyed doing it. That was why she was so annoyed when Jason didn't act as she expected. There had been too many times when his presence had caused the logical side of her brain to go spinning out of control. No, if there was one thing Benny definitely wanted when it came to dealing with Jason, it was to be in control. She didn't particularly like the way she acted around him. She knew he was trying his best, and that she treated him somewhat unfairly, but she couldn't help it. Benny wondered whether maybe, on some deep subconscious level, she was trying to prove something. Trying to prove that she was too good for Jason, perhaps?

Benny,' said Jason, pointing to the ground, 'I think we've got a problem.' She looked down to see that Heldov had fallen to the ground and was clutching his chest, clearly in pain. They rushed over to him.

'What's the matter, Heldov?' said one of the villagers, clearly worried.

'I'm OK,' Heldov said, breathing heavily. 'Just tensed a muscle or something.'

Benny helped Heldov to sit up. 'It didn't look like nothing to me,' she said. 'Are you sure you're not straining yourself too much?'

Heldov looked at Benny with an expression that told her not to mother him. 'My dear Bernice,' he told her, 'the entire fate of my world is in the balance. I think there'd be something bloody wrong with me if I wasn't under strain!'

Benny realized that there was no point arguing with him, so she settled for making sure he was comfortable. They

waited a few minutes for him to recover and as soon as he did so he rushed forward, as if to hurry the others along to make up for any time lost due to his condition.

They continued the climb, and after about half an hour, the gradient of the mountain was so steep that Benny found that she was leaning forward to prevent herself from falling backwards.

She looked over at her companions. Heldov seemed to be OK now, although she could tell that he was doing his best to put on a brave front. He had obviously lived a long and fulfilling life, and was quite aware of the risks to his health this adventure entailed. Nevertheless, Benny felt slightly guilty about not being stricter with the poor chap. She really should have told him to go back. It struck her just how ridiculous that thought seemed when she reminded herself that she was about to send everything he had ever known into a dying universe. Things were not exactly rosy for anyone on the planet right now.

It wasn't just Heldov who appeared to be struggling. The other three villagers were slightly twitchy, but Benny guessed that this was due more to their deep-rooted fear of Casmov than to actual physical exhaustion. Only Jason seemed to be unaffected by the climb. Either he wasn't treating the situation anywhere nearly as seriously as he should be, or he was showing a determination unlike any she had seen in ages. She shuffled over to him and patted him on the back.

'You're very cheery,' she said, 'given the distinct lack of oxygen in these parts.'

Jason grinned. 'Yeah,' he said, 'I used to go climbing a fair bit, you know.'

'Oh? When?'

'Ages ago. Just after I finished with Charlene. It was a great way to meet new people.'

'Right,' said Benny, understanding. 'I bet you fancied the instructor too.'

Jason looked at her sheepishly. 'How did you know?'

She gave him a light punch in the ribs. 'Bastard,' she said, giggling.

It was there. As much as Benny did not want it to be, as much as she denied it to herself, the old chemistry between them was definitely still there.

‘Bastard,’ she said again.

A rumble of thunder echoed across the rapidly darkening sky. The snow had stopped for a while but now the first signs of rain were starting to appear.

‘Benny?’ Jason asked. ‘I’m worried about the other villagers. The ones the NMA were after.’

Benny sighed. ‘I know,’ she said, ‘but there was nothing we could do for them.’

Jason looked uncomfortable at this thought. ‘But we just left them at the hands of the NMA, you know? It just doesn’t feel right.’

‘I completely understand, Jason,’ Benny told him. ‘And I agree with you. The thing is, this isn’t a clear-cut situation. Every time I shut my eyes, I agonize over whether we’re doing the right thing. Whether I’m the saviour of the universe or the executioner of millions.’

Jason nodded. ‘You’re wondering whether we should be doing more than looking at the big picture. You’re wondering whether we should do something for the people here, at least make sure these people know what they’re in for? I know, I was thinking exactly the same things.’

Benny was touched by Jason’s compassion, his insight. She knew better than anybody that he could be genuinely caring. It was just that, well, it wasn’t a side of him that he allowed to surface that often. He was Jason Kane, the king of the crocodile tears. She thought over his past attempts to be philanthropic, and realized that she could work out an ulterior motive for every single one of them. Even his plans to go to Vremnya to help the war orphans was clearly an attempt to renew favour with his adoring public. This time, however, she could somehow tell his compassion was totally genuine.

Who would have thought it: Jason Kane coming up with the goods in a situation like this? That was part of his mystique, his refusal to be pinned down. Much of the time he

was self-serving, repetitive and annoying, but at other times he was simply adorable. Benny realized that, no matter how much she tried to deny it, she loved him very much. The least she could do was say something to make him feel better about himself. It would make a nice change, if nothing else.

‘Try not to worry, Jason,’ she said. ‘Please. The NMA might not find the villagers, and if they do...’ Come on Bernice, she thought, think of something comforting to say. ‘Even if they do, they’ll probably just become converts. They’ll be free again within hours if our plan succeeds.’

‘Free, or dead?’

‘Look, Jason, we can’t worry about their chances in this other universe until nearer the time. There’s really nothing else we can do right now.’

Jason reluctantly nodded. Benny could see that this was going to be a long and difficult climb. Time to change the subject, Benny decided.

By now, the rain had started pelting down quite heavily, turning the snow underneath Benny’s feet to slush.

‘Now that’s irony,’ she told Jason. ‘This planet waits ages for a decent rainfall, and just when it only has a few hours left in this universe, just when the planet doesn’t need the rain any more, it starts pissing it down.’

‘Yeah, well,’ said Jason. ‘At least the gods haven’t decided to bless the Dellahans with a plague of frogs or anything.’

Well, apart from those exchange students last year, Benny thought, quickly cursing herself for the thought.

The ground shook again as another tremor rocked the area. The full force of it hit Benny this time, and she tumbled forward. She saw Jason reach out to grab her, but he was just too far out of reach to succeed. She slipped and shuffled her feet to stop herself falling to the ground. She failed, and went crashing down. Benny felt herself slipping down the mountain. The slope she had been climbing was far too steep for her to regain her balance and slipping became tumbling as she got further and further away from the expedition party.

‘Benny!’ Jason shouted.

The thick clothing she was wearing seemed to be absorbing the majority of the impact as she fell, but every so often she ended up with a mouthful of dirty slushy snow. And her heavy cladding also prevented her attempts to grasp hold of the ground in order to halt her descent.

After what was probably only a few seconds, but seemed like ages, the ground levelled out, and her descent stopped. She waited, groaning in the white void, staring up at the sky. After about thirty seconds, she had composed herself enough to attempt to sit up, and see just how far behind the others she was.

‘Are you all right, Benny?’ Jason’s voice said. She looked up to see the big oaf standing over her, offering a hand. He’d obviously come down after her, but she’d been too busy doing somersaults to notice. She nodded, and gratefully took his hand. Jason helped her up, and she found it harder to regain her balance than she had expected. He steadied her. Then, once he was sure she was stable, ran his fingers affectionately through her hair.

‘Thanks,’ Benny said. ‘I’m fine. Really. Ow!’

‘What is it?’

Benny turned her neck to try to see her back. ‘I think I’ve hurt my back,’ she said.

‘Hang on,’ said Jason, ‘let me take a look at it.’

Benny unzipped her coat and slipped it off. She shivered as Jason lifted the back of her shirt up, not because she didn’t like what Jason was doing, but because it was so damn cold.

‘It’s OK,’ Jason told her. ‘You’ve just grazed it a bit.’ He shuffled off and began reaching into his rucksack. ‘Hang on,’ he said. ‘I think I’ve got something in here for that kind of thing.’ He took out an aerosol can, and once more lifted Benny’s clothing to see the injury. ‘This might sting a bit,’ he warned her. He sprayed a cold liquid on to Benny’s back, which tingled yet soothed at the same time.

‘What is it?’ Benny asked.

‘Just some antiseptic healing spray. It should speed up the healing process and dull the pain.’

When Jason had finished applying the spray, Benny put her coat back on, zipped it up, and gave Jason a big hug.

‘Thanks,’ she said. ‘I appreciate that.’

‘Benny, do you really think I wouldn’t do whatever I could to help you?’

Benny smiled, and chided herself for her lack of faith in him.

‘Come on,’ he said briskly. ‘Let’s get back up to the others.’

It turned out that, despite the long time the fall had seemed to take, they were only about a minute behind the others, who were looking back, concerned. They soon caught them up, and Benny was touched as they asked about her wellbeing.

‘I’m fine,’ she told them. ‘Now, let’s get to this river.’

It took only another ten minutes for them to arrive at the point where the river emerged from the mountain. The water was flowing at a tremendous speed, making a noise that drowned out the splattering of the rain. A hot mist rose from the river: steam. Despite its appearance, the water was boiling hot.

By the side of the river, there was a small path that led into the mountain. It was just big enough for one person to get through at a time.

Benny looked at the boiling water. ‘This looks pretty dangerous,’ she said. ‘I hate to think what it’s like inside there.’

‘Well,’ said Heldov, ‘it’s even hotter. That’s why we built the power station.’

‘I don’t like this,’ Benny said. ‘I think it’s too dangerous for us all to go in.’ She pointed to the villagers.

‘Heldov, I think those three should stay here,’ she said. ‘We’ll need backup if there’s any trouble.’

Heldov nodded. ‘Probably a good idea. They were all fearless earlier, but now we’re closer I imagine their courage will have lessened.’

‘Good,’ said Benny. ‘But make sure they know that if anything happens to us it will be their responsibility to get the transference nodes in place.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Heldov. ‘They know what they’re doing. That kind of excitement is why they volunteered for this in the first place.’

‘Right,’ Benny said, looking around at her team. ‘Jason, Heldov, you’re coming with me.’ She pointed to one of the villagers, Damko. ‘You as well.’ Damko, a young man with a sallow complexion, nodded and walked up to her. She pointed to the other villagers. ‘You two stay here as backup. I’ll radio you if there’s any trouble. Do you have your comlinks?’ Everyone nodded.

‘Great,’ said Jason, punching the air. ‘Let’s rock!’

‘I *do* hope that was supposed to be ironic,’ Benny muttered in his ear as she walked past him.

One by one, with Benny leading the way, they took their coats off to avoid roasting to death, placed them in their backpacks, then began to make their way along the path that led into the mountain. Getting past the entrance to the mountain was relatively easy. Each member of the team had to be careful as they made their way across the dark, narrow path. They had to have their backs pressed tightly against the wall, as none of them could risk falling into the boiling spring. The hot steam coming from the river made breathing difficult, not to mention painful. They had to keep their heads facing upward to avoid being scalded.

Unsurprisingly, as they got deeper into the mountain, the light dropped considerably.

‘Hang on a mo,’ said Benny, reaching into one of her pockets. She pulled out a pocket torch and flicked it on. ‘There,’ she said, ‘that’s better.’

The rock walls of the passage glistened in the torchlight, giving off an eerie blue glow. The pattern on the surface of the rock was wild and fractal, at times appearing completely natural, at others seeming man-made.

‘This place is freaky,’ commented Jason.

‘Of course,’ Damko shouted back. ‘It is the domain of the gods.’

‘How much further is it, Heldov?’ Benny asked.

‘Not much further,’ the man called back. ‘You’ll see.’

Eventually the tunnel widened and the travellers found they did not have to be quite so careful where they walked.

The river started to zigzag at various points, then eventually diverted away from the path, into the rock.

‘That’s better,’ Benny said, wiping her sleeve against her brow to remove the sweat. ‘Things should be a bit cooler now.’

They kept going along the path, which soon opened out into a vast brightly lit chamber. What looked like a thousand burning torches lined its walls, lighting the place with an unholy glow that flickered and spat. The chamber was filled with a yellowy haze which Benny was sure smelt of sulphur, although perhaps that was her imagination working overtime. The walls of the chamber were covered in pieces of skeletons. Bones of a variety of shapes and sizes were stuck there in a seemingly random order, and across the wall skulls stared out longingly, their mouths frozen in expressions of eternal screaming. Benny wondered who the bones had belonged to. Most of them appeared to be Dellahan, but Benny recognized a few of them as being the remains of a variety of alien races.

There appeared to be no doorways in the walls of the chamber, meaning that their plan to get further into the mountain was well and truly thwarted. Several parts of the wall were covered in carvings and hieroglyphics. On the floor of the room stood a variety of monuments and statues of an assortment of shapes. Gargoyles, renaissance humans, pyramids and pillars. It was as if someone had swept through the galaxy collecting random examples of religious artwork and writings, and created a macabre museum to suffering.

‘Yuck,’ said Jason.

Benny turned to Heldov. ‘What is this place?’ she asked.

Heldov shook his head. ‘I’ve no idea.’ The tone of his voice sounded frantic. ‘I’ve never been here before. I swear, this room simply did not exist when I worked here.’

‘It’s Tehke,’ said Damko, his eyes feverish and reddened. Benny could not remember when she had last heard anyone

so scared. 'He's done this. He's scooped a chunk out of the mountain and built this... this place.'

'Hang on,' said Benny. 'I'll see if any of this junk gives us any clues what's going on here.'

She walked over to one of the monuments in the centre of the room and brushed off some of the dust. 'The inscription's in Hebrew,' she said. 'I can read a bit of that.'

She ran her fingers over the patterns carved into the rock. 'For the one who holds the key is not always the one who will walk through the door, and the, erm, dreaded dog? No, that can't be right.'

'Come on,' said Heldov. 'It doesn't matter what these inscriptions say. This stuff seems to have been dumped here by the gods rather than being clues left by the ancient Dellahans.' He walked over to Benny and placed a hand on her shoulder. 'We're not in archaeology any more,' he said.

'You're right,' she mumbled. She let out a deep breath and leant on the monument. 'I was rather enjoying that though.'

There was a slight creaking noise, and Benny noticed the room start to rotate.

'What the hell?' she said.

'Benny! Get away from there!' Jason said.

'What?' she said, looking at the monument. 'Oh, shit!' She jumped away, realizing that the room was not rotating but the monument was. The thing crashed to the ground with a noise that shook the room. At first, this was followed by silence, but then a low rumbling sound began. The rumbling got louder and the room began to shake.

'It's an earthquake!' shouted Heldov.

They all got to the ground as quickly as they could and waited for the shaking to stop. The whole room seemed to be in turmoil, with objects colliding and smashing to the floor in all directions and pieces of the rock opening up all around them. Benny knew that they risked severe injury by doing this, but they were helpless to do anything but sit it out. At last the rumbling stopped, and Benny let out the breath she had been holding.

‘Is everyone OK?’ she asked. She stood up and did a quick head count. Benny was relieved to see that they were all fine. ‘Ugh!’ she said, suddenly struck by the strong smell of the mist. ‘Either this place needs new air conditioning, or someone’s really let one rip.’

The air had been breathable if musty before, but now was conspicuously thick and gaseous. Whatever Benny was breathing in, she doubted it was good for her. A high-pitched humming started in her head and she realized her vision was beginning to distort slightly. Most of all, she found herself drawn forward, towards a large crack in the centre of the chamber that appeared to have formed during the quake. She crawled forward and saw that it was no crack. The earthquake had caused a huge chasm to appear. She peered over the edge and blinked at what she saw. The chasm was filled with red gas and balls of lightning zipped violently around its recesses. She could see down about thirty metres before the gas blocked her view, so, although she had no idea how deep it was, she knew that there was no way anyone could survive a fall into it.

‘What’s going on?’ said Jason.

‘It’s the chasm!’ said Damko, who had joined Benny at the pit’s edge. ‘The doorway that leads to the prison of the gods!’ He pointed down into the pit. He was now screaming hysterically. ‘That’s where they came from, Bernice. That’s where the gods came from. You’ve revealed their secret! *They’re all in there!*’

Well, that was something of a find. Benny was severely tempted to go back and fetch some heavy weapons, drop them down the pit and hope they wiped out any gods remaining down there, but she knew it wouldn’t do any good. Most of the gods were on land by now, and, as Benny had learnt well in the past, there were some problems that couldn’t be solved simply by blowing things up.

‘My god, it’s beautiful,’ Damko said, his voice shrill. ‘I have to be a part of this.’ He walked right up to the edge of the chasm, and breathed in, a huge smile on his face.

‘Careful,’ Benny said, her vision getting more and more cloudy by the second. ‘You might fall -’ Benny stopped as Damko leapt into the air, then plunged down into the chasm ‘- erm, in.’

Wow, thought Benny. So it was possible. You could jump into the chasm and be happy. For the first time in ages she felt like she really belonged. What a wonderful place this was. She wondered how easy it would be to join in the fun that lay in wait at the bottom of the chasm. Sure, it was a long drop, but the gods would protect her. She glanced around the room, and saw Heldov, looking concerned.

A hand clasped the back of her leg. It was Jason.

‘Benny,’ he said. ‘Are you OK?’

She stood up, took his hand in hers and smiled. ‘Of course I’m OK,’ she said, pointing to the chasm. ‘Don’t you see? We’re at the doorway to heaven.’

She could tell by the look on Jason’s face that he was coming round to her way of thinking. ‘Come on then, Jason,’ she said. ‘Are you ready to join me? Are you ready to come with me to paradise? To join me in the chasm?’

Jason nodded.

Benny took a deep breath, and prepared to jump.

ONE TRUE GOD (ACCEPT NO SUBSTITUTES)

Time passes within the palace, but day and night have no meaning. Within those walls there is pleasure, there is pain, there is scripture and judgement. The Sultan's people quite literally live and die at the whim of the gods. Or, nowadays, the one god: Tehke, the Burning One.

The sun was high over the courtyard when the workers were allowed their lunch break. Cwej joined his fellow toilers as they sat in the meagre shade given by the scaffolding, and drank greedily from the water bottle that was passed around the group. The scaffolding supported the great statue they had been press-ganged into assembling, a statue to the glory of Tehke. The statue had been under construction for some time before Cwej's arrival, and had originally been intended to honour Mor'yuchi. But loyalties change, and even deities can fall out of favour. Cwej and his fellow workers, all strong and disposable as far as the Sultan was concerned, were currently involved in moulding sheets of red-hot metal to the surface of the statue - uncomfortable and dangerous work. Earlier that day one man had fallen from the scaffolding, reeling in pain after he accidentally dropped his welding equipment on to his thigh. Black, fatty smoke poured away from the wound on his leg as he lay dead on the stony ground, blood pooling around his shattered head. The palace guards had dragged the corpse away, and ordered the work to continue. Veiled servant girls were forced to mop up the stain, cleanse the mosaic tiles for the Sultan's pleasure.

Cwej twisted his stubby neck around to look up at the shrouded figure of the statue. With the metal applied, it

would appear burning scarlet in the midday sun. A man aflame. Behind tarpaulins sculptors worked to etch blisters and scars into the face, sharpen the teeth, change Mor'yuchi's face to the hideous visage of Tehke. From the glimpses of the whole thing he had seen while bashing plates of soft metal into shape, Cwej thought it was probably going to be the ugliest, tackiest piece of crap he had ever seen. And Cwej had been to 1970s England, so he'd seen a lot of tasteless crud to compare it to.

The inhabitants of the Sultan's palace seemed intent on pushing towards both heaven and hell at the same time, recreating the most extreme of experiences possible. It was as if the contradictions of being bounced from one faith to another, from god to god, switching rituals and symbols every time, was taking its toll. The whole place was being driven mad by its eternal contradictions.

But the sun was out, and that was at least some consolation. Cwej leant back against the rock of the statue's broad base. The rough stone felt warm through his shirt. He closed his eyes, felt the rays soak his skin in warmth. Almost hypnotized, he remembered how he had managed to get into such a mess.

A night had passed since Clarence and Cwej had been put in the tender care of the NMA. After Maande had left them in the hands of the army, they were dragged up the hill to the palace. Cwej was still uncertain whether Maande's actions were motivated by malice, or were a genuine attempt to smuggle them closer to the heart of Tashwari. It could have been the former, but he preferred to believe the latter. It had certainly got them closer to the Sultan. Right at the foot of his throne, in fact.

That throne was covered in rich purple velvet and gold leaf. So was the Sultan. He reclined on his throne, sucking purple smoke from a tall hookah. When he looked down at them, Cwej could see his pupils were wide, the rest of his eyes a mass of burst blood vessels.

‘Who are these two?’ asked the Sultan, his voice slurred. ‘And why were they brought to me? I have little time for such pettiness.’

‘An offering from a servant of Mor’yuchi,’ said the NMA captain, nervous at being in the Sultan’s throne room, surrounded by nobles and their whores. ‘I believe they may be some attempt to gain your favour, Lord Sultan.’

‘Really?’ said the Sultan, his eyes narrowing. ‘The fallen god should know that I am loyal to Tehke now, and will not deal with false prophets. Besides, why would I ever be turned by such a feeble gift? What merit are these two rough specimens?’

The hangers-on of the court tittered at this. The NMA captain, clearly feeling out of his depth, attempted to assert his position.

‘I don’t know,’ he said, walking around Cwej and Clarence. ‘The fat one seems sturdy enough - I am sure he can be put to some kind of useful work. And the other has a few hidden assets we found along the way.’ The captain pulled Clarence’s cloak away, revealing the folded wings beneath.

‘Well, well, well,’ said the Sultan, after a suitably awed pause. ‘This gift may come from Mor’yuchi, but truly its origins must be with Tehke, for only the One True God could produce a thing of such beauty. I will accept Mor’yuchi’s gift, but in the full knowledge that I will not waver in my position.’

Cwej and Clarence looked at each other in relief. It seemed that their lives were of some value to the Sultan — for the moment.

The Sultan took another long drag from the hookah, rolling his head as the smoke intoxicated him further.

‘Take the fat one down to the dungeons,’ said the Sultan, smoke from his nostrils making him look like an irritable dragon. ‘He can be put to work on the great statue as soon as the sun rises.’

Cwej had been dragged away from the throne room before he could find out what the Sultan had in mind for his friend. He hoped it was nothing too horrendous. During the night, in

the dark of the Sultan's dungeons, the workers had whispered to each other of the depravities that went on in the chambers upstairs, of the orgies that, at any time, might turn into bloodbaths on the Sultan's murderous whim. According to some, the reason there was so much room in the dungeons was that all the torture equipment had been moved to the Sultan's bedchamber.

Cwej was no longer the innocent he had been when he first met Benny, and he had always suspected that all those chinless aristocrats were a little kinky, but the other workers described acts so depraved they made de Sade, Summerisle and Sails seem like conservatives by comparison.

'Back to work, you rancid little creeps!' bawled the foreman. Cwej opened his eyes, squinting in the sun. Back up the scaffolding it was, back to work on the Sultan's great folly. Cwej sincerely hoped that, whatever Clarence was being forced into, it wasn't that much worse than his job.

'No,' Clarence begged. 'No, please, no more. I can't cope.'

'Are you sure?' said the Sultan, waving another plate of biscuits in Clarence's face. 'They're nice and chocolaty, with little marshmallows inside.'

'No, really, no,' said Clarence. 'Even a gift from the gods can make me sick, and I'd hate to throw up all over this nice sofa. What is this fabric again?'

'Skins of the infidels slaughtered in my name,' said the Sultan conversationally.

'Oh,' said Clarence, patting the furniture with slight distaste. 'That explains the little hairs, I suppose.'

Masked serving girls wandered the room, tidying up after the Sultan and responding to his every whim. During the long night, Clarence had been given the chance to witness far more of human biological activity than he would want to. He was rather glad that he was an entirely artificial entity, and had no need to partake in such things. Thankfully, the Sultan hadn't even suggested that Clarence join in the revelries, and had instead adopted him as some kind of mascot and confidant. The Sultan never seemed to sleep,

partaking of endless drugs and potions - smoked, powdered and digestible - to stay active, becoming feverish and languid in turn. If he had been human, Clarence would be afraid of the Sultan, but he knew there was little the man could do to harm him: he had been pretty much indestructible from the moment his body began operating. No, it was better to sit comfortably, eating the Sultan's biscuits - within reason - and drinking his wine, while the deranged ruler went through his daily business, the tyranny and depravity of the leader of a community of fanatics. So far, in spite of the stream of advisers, slaves and lackeys who had drifted through the Sultan's presence, none of them had matched Sevic's description. But Clarence was patient, and knew that the best place to find anything out was right where he was, in the trust of the most powerful mortal on Dellah.

And what a mortal it was who possessed that power! The Sultan was borderline deranged most of the time, and often slipped over that border into the neighbouring state of insanity. As well as fulfilling his carnal desires, the Sultan had gone through other phases during Clarence's time in his presence. He had become paranoid about his finances - even though the Dellahan economy had effectively collapsed - demanding an accountant be dragged to him and given a good beating. Clarence had watched in horror as a suitable man had been found, and the Sultan had helped the guards kick him to within an inch of his life. Under any other circumstances Clarence would have acted, but the way the beaten man praised Tehke for forgiveness all the way through the assaults had made him sit tight, fingernails digging into his palms. There was no point blowing his cover to save another fanatic.

At other times the Sultan had simply ignored Clarence, consulting with his other confidants. He had a supposedly magic conch shell, from which he claimed to hear voices when he lifted it to his ear. He had a slave, wrapped from head to foot in black leather, whom he kept in a box in the corner. When the zip across the slave's mask was pulled open, he would whine like a dog until the Sultan fed him

rancid scraps of meat. Then he would make affectionate noises, more beast than man. Then there was the golden bust of a helmeted man the Sultan would occasionally talk to. Judging by the long gaps in the conversation, Clarence presumed the Sultan believed the statue was talking back. Perhaps, in some strange way, it was.

Either way, there was no getting around the fact that the Sultan was a complete and utter basket case. Getting so close to his gods had clearly done nothing to bring him peace of mind, or indeed any kind of mental stability. One of the most alarming things about him was the fact that no one contradicted the insanity of his orders. The Sultan's subjects followed him without question, whether throwing a refrigerator out of the window because the Sultan was sure it was whispering about him when he wasn't in the room, or nailing an old woman to the palace wall because the Sultan wanted to cover an unseemly crack in the paintwork. Clarence was desperate to know how the Sultan maintained this kind of influence, certainly in the wake of the *B-Aaron's* crashing on the planet. So, having judged that biscuit time was one of the better times to ask an impertinent question, Clarence decided to find out.

'Your subjects are very loyal, great Sultan,' he oozed, applying all the ego-massaging techniques he had learnt dealing with Jason Kane's colossal sense of self-importance. 'They do you credit, and the way they honour the One True God at your bidding is a testament to your wisdom and genius as a ruler.'

'Thank you, oh gift of the gods,' said the Sultan, swapping plates. 'Custard cream?'

'No, thank you,' said Clarence politely. 'I am quite full to bursting with the many offerings you have made to me. In my travels on behalf of great Tehke, I have met many of his lieutenants and their flocks, but none as dedicated as you and your people.'

'Well,' said the Sultan mischievously, pulling his bloated body off the sofa, 'I have some aid in my work here. Come and see.'

The Sultan grabbed Clarence by the hand and pulled him out of the room. As they left, the caged gimp mewled for his master.

‘When the gods first came, I was one of the first to hear their wisdom,’ said the Sultan excitedly, leading Clarence down seemingly endless corridors lined with rich tapestries and elaborate paintings. ‘I became one of their earliest followers, eager to spread their word among my loyal people. One of the gods, Mor’yuchi, realized my worth and blessed me with an enormous totem, for which I am most grateful.’

Pushing his way past three or four armed guards, the Sultan slammed open a pair of doors, leading the way into a vast domed hall. The entire chamber was dominated by a towering orange artefact, carved out of glowing crystal.

‘Behold the Belief Amplifier, spreader of the good word,’ said the Sultan. ‘Isn’t it magnificent?’

Clarence could only nod in reply, dumbstruck by the monstrous thing.

‘I am, of course, fully aware that this, as a product of the false god Mor’yuchi, is a tainted object,’ whispered the Sultan conspiratorially. ‘But now it serves great Tehke, and allows my people to be free of the taint of unbelief even while the One True God is away converting the unenlightened. Its influence spreads much of the way through Tashwari, and has prevented most of my people from falling under the curse of unbelief that has spread throughout the land in recent months.’

So, thought Clarence, this thing was stopping the *B-Aaron*’s influence from breaking up the Sultan’s little party. A god in a box, or, more to the point, a god in a giant novelty candle.

His thoughts were broken off by an odd whistling sound. Clarence frowned.

‘Is the holy artefact supposed to make such a noise?’ he asked, nodding towards the totem.

‘What noise?’ said the Sultan. He strained to hear it, and his eyes widened as he caught the sound. He could hardly miss it - it was louder now.

‘I think it’s coming from outside,’ said Clarence.

‘Yes,’ murmured the Sultan. ‘It sounds rather familiar. Just like a -’ His face contorted in panic. ‘Oh, fu-’

His words were drowned out as the smart missile screamed through the dome, ploughing into the Belief Amplifier.

Cwej nearly rolled off the scaffolding when the explosion rocked the palace. Over the noise of hammers beating metal, nobody had heard anything, but from the damage to the main dome Cwej guessed that some kind of missile had been launched from outside the palace. Probably a precision-targeted weapon, judging by the accuracy of the shot. Perhaps even something with an on-board AI. Whoever had fired that one must have been desperate to hit a very specific target. Kit like that was hardly freely available on a blockaded pariah world like Dellah. Whatever had happened was important. Cwej just hoped it didn’t overlap with his mission – he could do without some offworld assassin killing Sevic before they could get to him, which was a disturbingly believable reason for such a hi-tech assault. Either way, he had to get in there and find out what the hell was going on. Time to stop the arts-and-crafts rubbish, go back indoors and do something less boring instead.

Sliding down the scaffolding’s ladders, Cwej quickly had his feet back on the ground. Spinning around, he expected to get hassle from the foreman, or the guards, or even get grassed up by one of his fellow workers, the treacherous little proles. What he didn’t expect was to find the foreman holding an impromptu prayer meeting.

‘Consider the flame,’ said the now humbled foreman, holding up a lit oxyacetylene torch for all to see. They responded with awe. ‘See how the sacred flame flickers, how it brings light and heat to us all. It is the flame we worship, for without it we would not be able to cook our food, to burn fuel, or, as we all know, weld metal to build our homes and construct the many wonders we are blessed with. The flame should be our god. The sacred flame.’

‘The sacred flame!’ intoned the workers and guards gathered around. Cwej shook his head. From a complex

pantheistic belief system to fire worship in minutes? What the hell was going on?

He tried to edge around the group without attracting their attention. Unfortunately, he accidentally knocked over an urn full of blood-red lilies. The urn shattered, flowers and earth scattered everywhere. The fire worshippers turned to him.

‘Will you not consider the flame?’ said the foreman, raising the torch again. The flame he worshipped was dim compared with the fanaticism burning in his own eyes.

Cwej backed away, tripping over the urn and falling on his back. He quickly rolled back on to his feet, plucking a flower from where it had lodged in his shirt.

‘Consider the flame?’ he said. ‘I’d rather consider... this lily!’

He threw the flower at them, then ran away before they had a chance to nail him to a tree.

Clarence had always been dismissive towards those who described him as being too good-natured, too willing to help anyone. He had regarded them as cynics, natural-born humans who didn’t understand how blessed they were, how sacred life was.

However, even he could see that rescuing the Sultan of Tashwari, a man who might as well have I’M A BASTARD - PLEASE SHOOT ME THROUGH THE HEAD tattooed on his forehead, from his well-deserved doom was probably a step too far down the path of excessive niceness. But that’s exactly what he had done, instincts kicking in as the missile crashed through the dome. Hoisting the Sultan under one arm, he had flown down the corridor, guards diving out of the way, as the missile made contact with the Belief Amplifier and detonated its explosive payload. The sacred device had seemed to absorb most of the blast, but the chamber it was in and much of the corridor leading away from it were devastated by flame. Several of the closest guards were reduced to a charred mess, while Clarence had merely lost another couple of feathers from his wings. The Sultan, as

was the way of these things, was completely unscathed, but incredibly annoyed.

'This is Mor'yuchi's doing, mark my words,' he boomed, holding a cloth over his mouth to guard against the smoke. 'I should have known he would have destroyed the device once it was in the hands of the One True God and his followers. The omnipotent tosswit will be damned for all eternity for this, just you see.'

Clarence nodded in mute agreement as they edged back down the corridor towards the Amplifier Chamber. The damage ahead was difficult to make out through the smoke, but at least the sprinkler system had put all the fires out. The tapes-tries were charred scraps, while what had once been paintings were merely blackened frames.

Another, less powerful, explosion rocked the palace as they re-entered the chamber with its shattered dome.

'Mor'yuchi again, I suppose,' muttered the Sultan, wafting smoke away from his face. The attack seemed to have made him more lucid than Clarence had ever seen him. He just hoped he didn't become sane enough to realize he was confiding in a strange alien.

The smoke cleared to reveal what was left of the Belief Amplifier. The blast had blown the top half of the device clean off, and the bottom half flickered erratically. The Sultan wandered around the object, peering at it intently.

'It seems to be partially functioning,' he scoffed. 'Mor'yuchi's plans to defeat me may have been brought down by the resilience of his own machinery. See, even the greatest human weapon cannot completely eradicate that which is constructed by divine hands.'

'Sultan, Sultan!' exclaimed a young girl, running into the room in a state of panic.

'What is it, Palma?' demanded the Sultan tetchily.

'Your advisers are worried for your safety,' babbled Palma, decorum shaken out of her by the assault. 'They also say that it is time for your elevation.'

'Elevation?' repeated the Sultan.

'They wish to make you a god,' said Palma simply.

‘What?’ exclaimed the Sultan, astounded. Then he turned to look at the broken Belief Amplifier. ‘Oh dear,’ he said quietly.

‘Clarence,’ shouted Chris, running into the room just as another explosion went off. ‘What’s up?’

‘Who the hell -’ began the Sultan, but Chris and Clarence ignored him.

‘Mor’yuchi seems to be attacking,’ said Clarence. ‘And we have a technical problem.’ He briefly outlined the Belief Amplifier and its malfunction.

‘That makes sense,’ said Chris. ‘Any sign of our target?’

‘Target?’ interjected the Sultan.

‘Not up here,’ said Clarence. ‘Any luck in the basement?’

‘Look, just what -’ burred the Sultan indignantly.

‘Afraid not,’ said Chris. ‘We’re just going to have to tear this place apart. The attack should provide cover enough.’

‘I demand to know -’ shouted the Sultan, before abruptly breaking off. Clarence and Chris spun around to see that he had been shot dead. They stared blankly at the corpse, then looked up to see Palma, a fire-damaged pistol in her hand. She must have lifted it from one of the dead guards, thought Clarence. Clever girl.

‘I’ve waited ages to nail that *bastard*,’ spat Palma. ‘So don’t look at me like I’m some fucking psycho.’ Her hands were shaking, and Clarence gently motioned for her to lower the gun, which she did.

‘Thank you,’ said Chris in relief as she dropped the weapon.

‘You’re with the resistance, aren’t you?’ she asked hopefully.

‘Sort of,’ said Clarence comfortingly. ‘We’re here to help.’

‘I want to help too,’ said Palma, her voice quavering. ‘I want to help you.’

‘OK,’ said Chris gently. ‘Do you know a guy by the name of Teran Sevic?’

Palma shook her head. ‘I’m just a maid. I don’t know the people here by name. I just do what I’m told.’ Tears welled in her eyes. ‘Whatever they tell me to do.’

‘Not any more,’ said Clarence firmly. ‘We’re taking you with us. But first we have to try to find this man. He’s very important. Do you understand?’

Palma nodded mutely.

Chaos, thought Cwej, chaos. As they worked through the palace, room by room, bombs dropped closer and closer. They were almost shredded by glass when an explosion shattered the windows of the room they had just left. In several areas they had to move rubble to check corpses, examining each one to make sure it wasn’t Sevic. But still no sign. Cwej didn’t know whether to be distressed or happy that their quarry hadn’t turned up dead.

Gunfire broke out. Mor’yuchi’s troops had entered the palace.

Cwej wondered whether they would find any resistance. The crippling of the Sultan’s Belief Amplifier had strange effects on the palace residents. While some maintained their belief, others had gained other faiths, or been reduced to cabbages by the shock. By the hectic sound of gunfire in the distance, Cwej suspected these effects were limited in range, and that the NMA patrolling Tashwari at large were putting up quite a fight. Good for them - this Mor’yuchi didn’t sound much better than any of the other gods.

As they got closer to the gunfire they became more careful. To Cwej’s great satisfaction he noticed that Palma had thrown herself into the business of staying alive, and her tears had dried up. Poor kid. What could living in a place like the palace do to a young girl? He supposed he didn’t really want an answer to that.

It was thoughts such as this, morbid speculations, that ironically brought disaster. I should have looked on the bright side, thought Cwej as an ill-judged step caused him to crash through a floor weakened by the explosions. His fall was broken by an old wooden dining table, which collapsed under his weight. He brushed plaster out of his eyes to see a gun barrel pointing in his face. Behind the gun was a black-

clad trooper, a scarlet 'M' embossed on his uniform. Behind that trooper were several more, and a hooded figure.

'Chris, you OK?' shouted Clarence through the hole.

The hooded figure stepped forward, throwing back his hood. His face was rounded and mauve, his eyes deepest black. A god. Mor'yuchi. His presence dominated the room.

'Come down from there and we will spare your friend's life, yes?' boomed the god.

There was a long silence.

'Very well,' said Mor'yuchi, regret tainting his rich voice. 'Kill him.'

'No,' said Clarence firmly, floating down through the hole in the ceiling that Cwej had caused, Palma held to his chest.

'An angel!' said Mor'yuchi in delight. 'How wonderful.'

There were screams in the distance. One of the troopers listened to a burbled message on his comlink.

'The NMA are driving us back,' he told Mor'yuchi.

'Very well,' said the god resignedly. 'We retreat to fight again.' He turned to his three prisoners. 'Take them to the truck. If they show any resistance, kill the girl.'

Chris, Clarence and Palma were dragged out of the room.

'What do you want with us?' screamed Palma.

The troopers paused in the doorway as Mor'yuchi turned.

'Ah, a feisty young thing,' he said. 'Perfect for my purposes, I'd say. You see, I want people - and angels, of course - like you three for my army of light. Together, we will purge millions of heathens, yes?'

INSIDE THE MOUNTAIN

Benny stared into the chasm, delighted at the joy she felt about leaping into it. She put one foot forward and was about to jump. This was it, the moment she'd been waiting for. The chasm was so inviting, so wondrous. All she could think about was how wonderful it would feel once she was down inside it. She didn't know where it led, but she didn't care. On some fundamental level she knew that what she was doing was right.

Suddenly Benny's head was filled with a loud screeching noise, and her vision rushed back into focus. She looked around, confused by her situation. What was she doing?

She looked down at the source of the beeping noise. It was her comlink. When Chris had told her that the comlinks were linked to their brainwaves, she had thought he was going a bit far, but now she could see that his fears were perfectly valid. It seemed that with all the precautions in place, the gods could still influence their minds.

Benny took a sudden step back, shook her head in an effort to clear it, then reached down and flicked her comlink alarm on. Every five minutes it would go off, sending out an alpha-wave disruption burst that would ensure she would be snapped out of any further trances she might get into. She looked over to see that Jason and Heldov were also looking dazed, not quite sure what had happened, but clearly not about to jump into the chasm. Then she flicked her comlink on to speak to Chris.

'Chris?' she said. 'Is that you?'

There was a burst of static before Benny heard the instantly recognizable soft tone of Chris's voice.

'Benny, where are you?' he said.

‘We’re inside Casmov,’ she told him, doing her best to speak clearly. The reception was appalling.

‘How are things?’

‘OK. We’re on schedule, but we think we may run into some trouble quite soon. Yourself?’

There was a long pause, as if Chris were not quite sure what to say at this point.

‘Something has come up,’ he said. ‘We’ve been drafted into the New Moral Army. Every time we try to get close to Sevic we get driven away. We need help, guys.’

‘Bloody hell,’ said Jason. ‘I thought they had the easy mission. Isn’t there anything we can do to help them?’

‘Not really,’ Benny said. It made her feel hollow inside to think of leaving her friends in the lurch, but she knew that any help she could give Chris and Clarence would come at the expense of the mission. She returned her attention to the comlink. ‘Just hold tight, Chris. We’ll try to help as soon as possible, but we have to finish our mission first.’

‘I know,’ said Chris, his voice sounding distressed. ‘I just can’t see how we’re going to find this guy in time. I just wanted to check in, you know, just in case you’d had better luck than us.’

‘Thanks, Chris,’ Benny said. ‘I’m sorry we can’t help you much.’

There was another pause, then a burst of static before Chris’s voice was heard again. ‘OK Benny, we’ll sort something out. Cwej out.’

The line cut off, replaced by the hiss of static. Benny shut off the comlink and turned to Jason. ‘We’ve got to get moving,’ she said. ‘If things are going as bad for the boys as it sounds, then we’re going to be on one hell of a tight schedule once we’ve put the nodes in place.’

‘Yeah, well we can only try our best,’ mumbled Jason.

‘In the meantime,’ said Heldov, who had been silently standing at the back of the room, ‘we need to get away from here.’ Heldov was eyeing the chasm suspiciously. ‘I’m not ready to do my lemming impression yet,’ he added.

They left the room through an alcove which, according to Heldov's memory of the geography of the place, would lead towards the reactor. Initially, it led into a stone passageway carved out of the mountain wall. After turning a corner, they were confronted with a solid, metal wall that was obviously man-made. They had reached the power plant. In the wall was a maintenance hatch from which workmen and engineers would come in order to inspect the power equipment.

Heldov knelt down and pulled a few switches on the hatch.

'I still know a few tricks,' he said. The hatch hissed open, and a wave of steam was sucked into it, indicating the change of pressure within.

'Well, it looks like things are pretty much as we left them,' Heldov said.

One by one, they crept through the hatch. It was a tight squeeze but, once they were through, the corridor they were in was far more spacious. At the end of it was yet another room, which seemed to have been converted from its previous power-station function into something more useful to Tehke and his followers. It was somewhat reminiscent of the previous room: gruesome remains of the dead lined the walls, but this time, rather than being lit by fire, the place was filled with a bright-red light that seemed to come from electric strobes suspended from the ceiling, far above. Benny wondered how much higher one could actually get in this place — they must already be fairly near the top of the mountain. Whereas the previous room had contained a variety of artefacts and monuments from different religions, the contents of this room were simply a large altar and a statue of a man who appeared to be on fire. Benny recognized the figure as being a variation on the theme of the burning man that permeated the writings of the Tehkeans, so assumed that the statue must be of the god himself. Around the edge of the room, underneath the skeletons, were rows of benches which clearly showed that this was some form of gathering room for Tehke's followers.

'This must be where they give the sermons,' she said.

Benny noticed that Heldov had clasped his hands to his head and was walking around as if in a daze. 'You OK, Heldov?' she called.

'I can't believe this,' he said. 'This was our workroom.' He pointed to the altar. 'That used to be where the transport to the reactor was. I've no idea how we get to it now that that's gone.' He pointed to the skeletons. 'None of them were here before. It looks like this room's been converted into a temple.'

Benny took a deep breath. 'Right,' she said, trying to pull the situation together. 'I think we have to assume that nothing can be taken for granted in this place. Some things will be as you remember them, Heldov, but others will have changed. One thing that has changed is how to get to the reactor. We've got to find another way.'

'Shh,' said Jason, lurking near the entrance. 'I can hear voices!'

Benny and Heldov ducked back and listened. Sure enough, there were voices, getting closer. 'We've got to get out of here,' Benny told Heldov.

'Let's get to the observation tower,' Heldov said. 'If that's still intact then there'll be equipment that'll tell us how to get to the reactor.' He pointed to a door on the other side of the room. 'If that way leads to the same place it used to, then we ought to be able to get there pretty much unnoticed.'

'Right.' Benny nodded. 'Let's go.'

They hurried out of the temple just as a door at the back of the room opened. As soon as they were safely away from the room, Benny risked a glance back. They had got out just in time - Benny saw a group of hooded figures in light-red robes walk into the temple.

'I suggest,' said Heldov, 'that we move rather quickly now.'

Benny nodded and they began to run up the corridor, getting as far away from the temple as they could.

On the way to the observation tower, the monotony of the steel walls was occasionally broken by slitlike windows to

the outside. This part of the power station was obviously above ground. Benny felt the urge to stop and look through them, but knew time was too short to admire the scenery. On the other side of the corridor were doorways which Benny assumed led to other parts of the station, or what remained of it.

The door to the observation tower was open. Heldov peered through into the room, then signalled to the others that it was safe. A bank of computer control panels and monitors lined the walls, and above these were three large windows, through which Benny had a panoramic view of the world outside.

‘Talk about Homer Simpson,’ Jason said.

‘We can access the main computer from here,’ announced Heldov, firmly planting himself down in a chair next to one of the terminals. ‘Just give me a few moments.’

Benny walked up to Heldov, placed a hand on the back of his chair and peered over at the monitor. Several maps and symbols flashed across the screen and she realized that Heldov must have been something of an expert when he used to work here. She looked across the room to see that Jason was standing with his face pressed against one of the windows, his breath misting up the glass.

‘I can see for miles,’ he marvelled. ‘There’s just nothing but snow and ice. No wonder the gods have been undisturbed for centuries.’

Heldov cleared his throat. ‘Now this is interesting,’ he said, beckoning Benny and Jason over to his computer screen. ‘It appears that the reactor is accessible only from an area registered on the maps as being a “forbidden zone”.’

‘Forbidden?’ said Jason. ‘In what way?’

Heldov shook his head and sighed. ‘I’m not sure, really. All the rest of this place is planned in detail according to these schematics, but that’s just an empty area. It’s just no-go, for some reason.’

‘Because from there you can get to the reactor?’ wondered Benny.

‘That might be it,’ said Heldov, ‘but why would Tehke be afraid of someone getting to the reactor? Why go to the trouble of sealing it off?’

‘It’s all about power, isn’t it?’ Jason said. ‘Think about it. Ever since the different gods’ followers have started fighting with each other there’ve been power cuts all over the shop, haven’t there?’

Heldov nodded. ‘Indeed. Before we left our village, it was so bad we were running low on candles.’

‘But I’m willing to bet that the power cuts weren’t just caused by the fighting,’ said Jason. ‘I reckon half of them were caused by the gods directly.’

‘I see what you’re getting at,’ said Benny. ‘The more agitated the worshippers become, and the more people try to persuade them away from their religion, the more defensive they’ll become and the stronger their belief will be.’

‘And the stronger the gods become,’ said Heldov, clearly trying to follow Benny and Jason’s train of thought but not quite getting it yet.

‘In my experience,’ continued Benny, ‘people are more inclined to turn to religion during periods of hardship. So the gods knock out the power stations, and in one fell swoop everyone’s quality of life tumbles. The Dellahans blame each other, the fighting continues, the gods get stronger...’

‘And so it goes on,’ said Jason. ‘And Tehke has sealed off the reactor to ensure that no one can get in here and restore the power.’

‘It makes sense,’ said Heldov. ‘Casmov supplies over eighty per cent of the planet’s energy. Just enough to make things difficult, but not enough to convince people that worshipping the gods isn’t giving them any benefits.’

‘Heldov,’ said Jason, ‘can you use that computer to find out whether your people are safe?’

Heldov sighed. ‘I hope so.’

‘Try searching for the logs of the Sultan’s jets,’ said Benny.

He tapped a string of commands into the keyboard, then sat back in his seat, waiting for some information to download.

'Bloody hell,' he said.

'What is it?' Benny asked.

'I've managed to get into the records for the New Moral Army. It says that the jets found the entrance to the city and have sealed it off.' He paused, and the tone of his voice became grave. 'There's no record of any prisoners being captured.'

Jason gave Benny a look that said 'I'm not quite sure what to say', and so Benny took it upon herself to try to console Heldov.

She placed a hand gently on his shoulder. 'But we all left the city, Heldov. Just because there are no prisoners doesn't mean... well, they might not have found the caravan.'

'No,' said Heldov, the confident depth of his voice having dropped to a quiet croak. 'Something's gone wrong. I can feel it.'

Benny was about to try to convince Heldov that he should be more optimistic, but realized she had more pressing matters to worry about than counselling her friend.

'Right,' said Benny. 'We need to get going. I'm getting rather anxious to find out what lies in that forbidden room.'

'How long do you think we've got?' Jason asked.

Benny reached into one of her pockets and pulled out Braxiatel's Chronoscope. 'Shit,' she said.

Jason peered over her shoulder. 'What is it?'

'There's a text message from Brax. It says the Doomsday Probe has been sighted several sectors away. We've got approximately three hours before the entire sector is neutralized.'

'Er, Benny?' said Jason. 'What was the time of the message?'

Benny cursed. 'Half an hour ago.' She blew a gust of air upward, cooling her forehead and momentarily lifted her fringe into the air. 'This is going to be very tight.'

Jason placed a hand tenderly on her back. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'We'll make it.'

Suddenly a crashing noise came from somewhere down the hallway they had just walked through.

Benny darted to the door, reached for her gun and peered into the corridor. A group of Tehke's red-robed followers were walking towards the observation room.

'Quick!' Benny said, turning to the others. 'People are coming!'

Jason was also readying his gun. 'How many of them?' he asked.

'Not sure,' said Benny, 'but there's too many to fight off ourselves.' She looked around the room and noticed a small maintenance cupboard in one corner. She ran over to it and opened the door.

'We need somewhere to hide,' she said, 'and this looks just about big enough.' She crouched herself into the back of the cupboard, next to an unfriendly-looking mop, a bottle of bleach, a first-aid kit and an old, ragged robe. 'Come on!' she said, beckoning to the others.

From her hideaway, Benny's vision was partially obscured, and she could see little but the control desk where Heldov sat. Jason's face appeared, looking hesitant, and he pulled himself into the cupboard. 'Budge up,' he said.

'Come on, Heldov!' Benny called. The man stood up from his seat and hurried over to the cupboard.

Heldov looked hesitant, and Benny felt the crush of Jason shoving her into the cupboard as far as he could.

'I don't think there's enough room in here,' Heldov said.

'Don't be silly,' said Benny. 'Come on, we can fit you in.'

Heldov shook his head. 'I know this place, Benny. I know there's no room. Now hide!'

Heldov slammed the cupboard door shut, despite Benny's protestations. Benny felt bad about having not only chosen a hiding place that was not big enough for all of them, but also for having gone in first.

Before she could do anything to help Heldov, the room was filled with the noise of chattering and footsteps. It was too late. The worshippers had entered the building.

Benny felt Jason duck back into the cupboard, and, rather than being annoyed at him for crushing her, she felt comforted by his closeness.

'Who are you?' a strange voice shouted.

There was a crashing noise and Benny found herself frustrated that she was unable to see what was going on outside the cupboard.

'The intruder has been tranquillized,' a voice said.

'Good,' said another. 'Take him to the temple. He will be sacrificed to the Burning One.'

Benny felt terrible. Heldov was innocent in all this. It wasn't his mission. He should have stayed with his family and friends. He should have helped to prepare them for the evacuation attempt. Instead, the stubborn old fool had come with them on their crazy, last-ditch attempt to save the universe, and now he faced death at the hands of a god. Benny almost wanted to burst out of the cupboard and fight the worshippers. She wanted to do anything to help Heldov, but she knew that anything they attempted would only get them sacrificed too. She hoped that Jason would realize the same thing, as he was even more impulsive in these sorts of situation than she was.

There was another scuffling noise, and the voices of the worshippers seemed to get more and more distant. Finally, there was silence. They waited for a few more minutes, just to make sure no one was left in the room, then Jason cautiously opened the cupboard door and stepped out. Benny followed him, and noted with relief that the worshippers were nowhere to be seen, although their chattering voices could be heard in the distance.

Benny knelt down and took off her rucksack. She checked that the transference equipment was safe, then put the rucksack back on.

'We have to save Heldov,' she said firmly.

Jason shook his head. 'We'll never get past all Tehke's men.' He pointed down the corridor. 'There must be hundreds of the bastards down there.'

'I know,' said Benny, trying to improvise a plan. 'We can't fight them, but perhaps we can get them from the inside.'

She walked over to the cupboard and reached inside.

‘What do you mean?’ Jason asked.

‘Here,’ said Benny, holding out the old robe she had found in the cupboard. ‘This should fit you.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Jason said. ‘What are you on about?’

‘Go down there,’ she said, ‘join in their prayer. It’s the only way we can find a way to save Heldov. That’s if he’s Still alive.’

Jason nodded. He hesitantly took the robe, a large brown number decorated in the jagged-flame symbol Tehke’s followers seemed so keen on. ‘What about you?’ he said.

‘Well, there’s only one robe, so I guess I’m going to have to run off and try to find this reactor,’ she said. ‘One of the doors from that corridor leads to this “forbidden room”. I know this equipment better than you, so it’s better for me to do this job and you be the distraction.’

Jason nodded. ‘In other words,’ he said, pointing his thumb down the corridor towards the temple, ‘whoever goes down there’d better be able to look after themselves.’

Benny smiled at Jason, comforted by his presence. ‘Exactly. I also think you’ll be more inventive than me when it comes to thinking of ways to keep them busy.’

Jason grinned. ‘I’ll try.’

‘Right,’ said Benny, checking that her pocket gun was fully charged. ‘Let’s go.’

She gave Jason a hug and kissed him on the cheek. ‘Good luck,’ she said.

‘I love you too, Benny,’ Jason said tenderly. They disengaged their embrace and Benny gave Jason one last wry look before running off down the corridor.

* * *

Jason saw Benny check the map Heldov had given her before she disappeared through a door in the side of the passage. He continued to the end of the passage, and tilted the hood of the robe so that it covered his head and placed his face in shadow. Hopefully this disguise would work. He looked inside the temple and saw that it was filled with a vast crowd of Tehke’s followers. They were all looking expectantly at the stage at the front of the room.

The crowd was chanting in a way that reminded Jason of the bit in *Jedi* when the Ewoks are worshipping C3PO. Unfortunately, instead of little furry creatures, these guys were fully grown men with attitude. Jason realized that he would be helpless if any trouble started.

The noise of rushing wind came from the front of the temple and everyone knelt down on the ground. Jason quickly followed. He peered up to see that a figure had emerged on to the front of the stage. It was a figure made of red flesh that burnt in eternal flame. Tehke, the Burning One.

The room silenced and Tehke began to speak.

‘My people,’ the demon said, ‘the time of your salvation is at hand. Over the past few months I’ve asked you to make certain changes to your lives, to make some sacrifices in my name, and you’ve all followed my wishes gladly. You’ve been faithful, loyal, and most of all worthy. Now I’m a fair god, and so I think it’s about time you were rewarded for your efforts.’

The demon stepped back and, with the rumbling noise of primitive machinery, a stone altar rose out of the ground next to him. Strapped to the altar was Heldov, looking slightly dozy, but very angry. He was shouting and screaming as he desperately tried to get someone to release him. His efforts were hopeless, as everyone in the auditorium appeared to be ignoring him. If anything, his pleas were adding to the spectacle of the event. Jason could tell from the expression on Heldov’s face and from the way he was struggling in his bonds that he was very scared. Jason looked around but realized there was nothing he could do immediately to help. He could only wait and see what happened. If things got nasty, maybe then he could attempt some heroics.

‘In half an hour,’ Tehke said, ‘the preparations will be complete.’ He held up a small metal object that Jason recognized as a nuclear detonator. ‘This mountain will be destroyed in a sea of fire, a sea that will mark my ascension into heaven and will launch your souls into paradise.’

Jason felt sick. Tehke was planning on nuking the mountain. He tried to figure out why, but he couldn't work it out. Tehke had said that the fire would mark his ascension into heaven. Braxiatel had told them that the gods were trying to spread across the galaxy, to planets other than Dellah. Perhaps this was what Tehke meant by ascension into heaven. Perhaps the energy created by the nukes, coupled with the concentrated belief of all his followers at such an emotional time, would be enough to let him leave the confines of Dellah. Jason shook his head. This situation got worse every minute.

Whatever the god's motivation, it was clear that Benny would have to act fast, and he hoped that she was having better luck than he was. He had to find a way to free Heldov and stop Tehke's plan, before everyone in the mountain died.

The crowd started to chatter excitedly, and Jason was amazed how enthusiastic they all sounded. Tehke had just told them that they would all be killed, yet nobody seemed to mind. It was like one of those cults they had in twentieth-century America, where the leader would commit suicide and all his followers would happily do the same.

The bright strobe lights that lit the room suddenly switched off and the temple was plunged into darkness. A couple of seconds later, the room was filled with the light of a thousand candles, which appeared to have been conjured out of the air by Tehke. In the distance, Jason could hear some choral tones, but he was unable to pinpoint which direction the sound was coming from. It seemed that Tehke was doing his best to create the best in religious environments.

'But before this great event can occur,' Tehke continued, 'you have to do one last thing for me.'

Tehke pointed to Heldov. 'At this crucial stage, we can't afford to have anyone here who is not from my flock. This intruder has blasphemed us, and thus he's just the guy we need to give this party a little more kick.'

A man standing in the shadows behind Tehke, dressed in a slightly lighter-coloured robe than the others, stepped forward.

‘My friends,’ he said, ‘the ascension can only occur if we are free from those who might spite and pollute our faith. We must be free from those who might offend the eye of our god.’ The man knelt down and picked up a large ceremonial knife. He walked over to the altar and held the knife above Heldov’s head. ‘And so,’ the man continued, ‘this blasphemer must be sacrificed, in order that he too will one day know paradise.’

Oh hell, thought Jason. Damned if you do and damned if you don’t.

‘Stop!’ he shouted, standing up.

The man with the knife turned to stare, shocked by this outrage.

Jason ran forward, shoving away and stepping over the crouched followers. Most of them were so deep in meditation, or so shocked by his actions, that they were too stunned to stop his progress. He managed to get to the front of the room, less than three metres away from the altar, before he was pulled down by some of Tehke’s more quick-witted followers.

‘What is this insolence?’ the man with the knife said.

‘Well well,’ said Tehke. ‘It appears not all of us truly have faith.’

Tehke jumped down from his position and his followers scuttled back out of the way. Tehke walked up to Jason, whose arms were being held tightly behind his back by one of the god’s men, and placed a fiery finger on his forehead. Jason found that the smell of sulphur from Tehke was repulsive, and felt ill as his forehead began to go numb with

Tehke’s touch. There was a flash of light, and a ringing began in Jason’s ears. It was as if Tehke had dredged through his secrets, as if he had touched his mind. Jason felt violated, somehow. Contrary to his expectations, however, he still felt just as much antipathy towards Tehke as he had before. He had expected that Tehke’s touch would turn him into a true believer, but it appeared that Tehke was unable to do this. Perhaps there was something about the mountain that inhibited the gods’ powers to convert people to their faith. Or perhaps Jason was just not naive enough to be

blinded to the gods' true nature. He was Jason Kane, the galaxy's number-one guy; he wasn't about to start worshipping some jumped-up alien in a hurry.

Tehke removed his finger from Jason's forehead and turned to his adoring crowd. 'Once more,' the god said, 'we have someone here who's only pretending to be one of my flock. His name is Jason Kane, and he's been a *very* bad boy.'

Tehke walked over to the man with the knife, who was clearly watching the situation with great interest, yet was unsure whether the interruption meant he was supposed to wait before completing the sacrifice of Heldov.

'James,' Tehke said. 'I want you to take Jason to the contemplation room. Lock him up in there, until he learns the True Faith.'

The man with the knife, James, nodded. 'What about the sacrifice?' he said.

'The sacrifice will continue,' Tehke said, 'but I need someone I can trust to make sure he is safely locked away.'

Tehke beckoned across the room to a young man who was standing at the edge of the stage. 'Cepachi San,' he called. 'Come over here.'

The boy shuffled over, his head bowed down and his eyes peering hesitantly at his god.

'You will perform the sacrifice, my child,' Tehke said.

James walked up to Cepachi San and handed him the knife. Jason noted how honoured the young man looked at the prospect of being the one to carry out the sacrifice.

James jumped down from the stage and walked over to the two men who were holding Jason. 'This way,' he said to them.

Jason felt a fist pound into his back, and felt himself being pushed forward by the men. 'Fuck off,' he shouted at them.

'Hey,' Tehke shouted indignantly. 'Language!'

Jason had had enough of this. He took a deep breath, then turned around as much as he could within the grasp of his captors and grinned. 'It's clobberin' time,' he said, as he kicked one of them in the groin. The man recoiled and Jason managed to wrestle his arm away. His other captor pulled

Jason's arm back in an attempt to stop him from getting away but Jason spun round and used his free hand to punch the man in the face. The man fell to the floor, his nose bleeding, and Jason made a run for it. Unfortunately, there were hundreds of worshippers, and there could only ever be one Jason Kane. He had barely moved ten metres before he was pulled to the ground by the disorderly but effective mob.

'How dare you resist the will of the god?' one of the worshippers said, punching Jason in the jaw. Jason looked up to see that a large crowd surrounded him. There was no way he could escape now.

Four men grabbed his limbs, lifted him up and began to carry him out of the temple. Jason refused the opportunity to make a joke about giving someone the bumps, and was quite shocked that such a silly thought could enter his head at a time of crisis. It's amazing what the mind comes up with to make life easier, he thought.

'Now,' Jason heard Tehke say, 'let the sacrifice continue.'

'No!' Jason shouted, hopelessly trying to wriggle out of the grasp of his captors. He managed to turn his head just enough to see the young worshipper, Cepachi San, lifting the knife above Heldov's head. Jason's vision was blocked by the one Tehke had referred to as James, who was standing over Jason with a look that was almost gloating. The crowd began stomping their feet, and Jason found he was thrown out of position so he was unable to see what was going on.

He felt his eyes welling up slightly with tears, and closed them tight. As he left the temple, the air was filled with a terrible sound that Jason knew he would never be able to forget. The sound of Heldov screaming as he was slaughtered.

WE WANT YOU AS A NEW RECRUIT

Cwej looked to the left, and saw a sea of black-uniformed Mor'yuchi followers crammed into the troop carrier. He looked right, and saw another load of black-helmeted fanatics staring blankly back at him. He turned back to Clarence and Palma.

'Do you know,' he said, 'I think this place must have a dress code?'

'Shut it, boy,' snapped one of the soldiers. He tried to wave his gun menacingly at Cwej, but the confined space reduced the gesture to a feeble waggle.

'Boo!' shouted Cwej, pulling a horrid face. The soldier jumped, accidentally pulling the trigger and letting off a shot into the ceiling. The rest of the troops collapsed into uproar. Cwej chuckled.

'Do you have a death wish?' hissed Clarence, gripping Cwej's shoulder.

A hatch opened in the ceiling, and a black-helmeted head popped down.

'What the hell's going on in there?' demanded the head.

The babbling crowd of soldiers explained, in the fragmented manner of fifty people speaking at once, that they would appreciate it very much if Cwej, Clarence and Palma were removed from their presence before a riot broke out. After a brief but heated debate the man upstairs agreed, and the three infidel were bundled up through the hatch.

Mor'yuchi's troop carrier was a three-storey, heavily armed affair the size of a small warehouse, running on tracks large enough to crush a cottage. As they were pulled up to the next level, Cwej looked around with interest. This floor had the benefit of windows, although as each of these had a

heavy weapon sticking out of it, most of the view was obscured by smoke. Black-clad gunners sat in spring-mounted chairs, which recoiled every time the vast plasma cannons they were firing let off another round. Cwej suspected more of them were injured by whiplash than enemy fire.

‘Nice,’ said Clarence, dodging as another chair recoiled across the room. ‘What are these guys firing at?’

‘The infidel of course!’ exclaimed the man who had brought them up here. ‘Mor’yuchi will speak to you soon, and you will see the need for our action. Then you too will help smite many heathens for the glory of Mor’yuchi.’

‘Yeah,’ agreed Cwej sarcastically. ‘So, where do we meet the one true whatever?’

The man pointed to a ladder. ‘On the top deck. There’s a good view up there.’

Reluctantly, but at least leaving the smoke and noise behind, they climbed up the ladder to the next level.

‘Shit,’ muttered Cwej as he stepped off the ladder on the next level. It was like the deck of a ship, open to the air, with a rail around the edge and a number of Mor’yuchi’s followers milling around, or sitting at tables planning their next strategy. Whenever the carrier hit a bumpy bit of ground, or crushed another building under its tracks, everyone on deck swayed from side to side in a practised motion, stabilizing themselves.

Mor’yuchi was standing by the rail at the very front of the vehicle, looking over the edge. As Clarence helped Palma off the ladder, the god beckoned for them to join him.

‘Well, if it isn’t my latest converts,’ Mor’yuchi said, with eerie confidence.

‘We’ll never serve you,’ said Clarence firmly. ‘Or any of your kind.’

‘Really?’ said Mor’yuchi. ‘I suppose you think that a simple lack of belief puts you beyond my reach. Perhaps you were affected by the wave of disbelief that emanated from the alien ship someone dropped on us. But, as you can see, my powers of persuasion reach beyond the influence of my compatriots.

I can convert anyone. Over here. Colonel.' He beckoned to someone behind them, and Cwej turned to see who Mor'yuchi was calling.

'Good to see you boys survived,' said Maande dryly. She was dressed in full Mor'yuchi uniform, with rank stripes on the sleeve. 'And you too, Palma. We need people like you three if we're going to win this war.'

'But...' stuttered Palma. 'But you hated the gods and their followers. What happened to the resistance?'

Maande shrugged. 'This is all the resistance there is. I'm not here because I've been brainwashed or anything: I'm here because Mor'yuchi is the only chance we've got to defeat the rest of the gods. He doesn't force people to worship him, and he won't force you either. He's our one chance for freedom.'

'Bullshit,' snapped Cwej fiercely, pointing towards Mor'yuchi. 'He's one of them, a god. Different scripture, same old shit.'

'Scripture?' echoed Mor'yuchi. He gestured around him. 'Does this look like a church to you, Mr Cwej? No, I have retired from the deity business for good. I can read your thoughts, Mr Cwej, and I can see you believe we are aliens of some kind, renegades from another universe, yes?'

Cwej uttered a keyword to himself, and the mental blocks kicked in before Mor'yuchi could find out about the plan, about Benny and Jason.

'Oh, very clever,' complimented Mor'yuchi, clapping his hands together. 'But I don't need your secrets. Look at this vehicle: my followers built it under my instruction, my spirit possessing them so that I might as well have hand-crafted every component myself. You are right, you see, about us. We are aliens. Scientists and radicals from another universe, outcasts in a universe of magicians, a universe without rationality. We came here to escape the death of that universe, but also to escape the stifling atmosphere of that place, the uniformity of it all. Here we could express ourselves, cast off our robes and let our hair grow, so to speak. Most of us have slid into depravity, I'm afraid, especially the one you call Tehke. But I intend to restore

order, dispose of my unruly brothers. I tried to exercise control in Tashwari by installing the Belief Amplifier, but it only drove them further into madness, and left them vulnerable to Tehke's advances. So I have gone back to my original vocation, as a scientist, building machines like this. That will earn the respect of the powers in this universe, will it not?'

'Powers?' said Clarence. Cwej could hear the alarm in his voice.

Mor'yuchi chuckled again. If nothing else, he retained his fellow gods' love of melodrama. 'While my fellows were fighting among themselves and indulging in their debaucheries I took the trouble to examine the wreckage of that ship. The level of technology was far in advance of anything else on this planet, evidence of a truly civilized people.' He looked between Cwej and Clarence. 'A cursory scan of you two reveals that Mr Cwej has numerous bits of nanotechnology in his bloodstream while you, Clarence, are an entirely artificial entity so delicately constructed as to put my own scientific abilities to shame. I respect such workmanship, and I'm sure your creators will welcome my diplomatic advances once I have rid Dellah of the scourge of my fellows.'

'I wouldn't be sure of that,' replied Clarence quietly.

Mor'yuchi grimaced in frustration at the failure of his attempts at persuasion.

'Look around you,' he boomed, gesturing to the surrounding landscape. As the sky darkened into evening, fire burnt in the rubble of dozens of buildings, and streaks of plasma destroyed even more. The carrier was moving across the landscape, razing everything to the ground. 'Already I have made great steps to destroy the gods' power base. Without believers they are vulnerable, and I intend to kill them all. Gentlemen, will you not join me in ridding Dellah of the gods.' He clenched his fist in a gesture of warlike intent. 'Will you not join me in committing deicide?'

Cwej sighed. 'We really don't have any other options, do we?'

Mor'yuchi looked smug. 'See? Persuasion is far better than control. Now, if you don't mind, a small demonstration of my growing power.'

He stepped to the edge of the deck, and indicated the town to their left. Many of the buildings had already fallen to the bombardment, but some still stood.

'Silence the guns!' Mor'yuchi cried. 'Stop the engines!'

Moments later, the barrage stopped, and the carrier ground to a halt.

Mor'yuchi turned to Cwej and Clarence. 'Your peoples may have very advanced technology, but would they not value an ally who can do *this*.'

He reached out into the air, and clenched his hand into a fist. With the engines and guns silent, all they could hear was a distant wailing in the ruined town. Then, a great rumbling began. Mor'yuchi's face twisted in effort as the sound of the ground moving below them became a colossal roar. The gathered crowd watched in amazement as an invisible wave passed across the town, reducing every brick, every stone, to dust, atomizing every single solid object in its path. A cloud of dust swallowed the troop carrier, thrown up by the immense destruction below.

The noise of Mor'yuchi's demonstration died down and it was quiet once more, apart from the awe-struck babbling and dust-choked coughing of the troops. When the dust cleared, Mor'yuchi stood proud, drained but triumphant. He pointed to where the town once stood.

In its place was a fifteen-kilometre-wide, completely flat square of dead land, a vast area of featureless sand, made from crushed building and bone. The only marking on the entire area was a vast letter 'M'.

'I hope your peoples are watching,' Mor'yuchi told Cwej and Clarence. 'I should imagine, with their technology, they will be able to look down and see my message to them.'

While Chris sat with Mor'yuchi's generals, planning their assaults on other bases of godly power, Clarence and Palma sat at the edge of the deck, legs dangling over the side. They

watched as missiles streaked out from the carrier, impacting with buildings in the distance. The carrier moved slowly, a mere few kilometres per hour, but its movement was relentless. They were only on the outskirts of Tashwari, but the amount of destruction that was left in their wake was phenomenal.

‘Do you think Chris believes in Mor’yuchi?’ whispered Palma.

Clarence thought about this for a moment. ‘No, I don’t think so,’ he replied. ‘I’m fairly sure he just wants us to stay at the heart of things. Besides, I think he wants to find out why Maande betrayed us. He’s very big on loyalty, Chris. Sometimes I think he may be more innocent than I am, in his own way.’

Palma reached out and touched Clarence’s cheek. Her skin was cold against his in the night air. He looked at her, that alabaster face with those dark, prematurely aged eyes.

‘I don’t think anyone could be more innocent than you,’ said Palma quietly.

‘Innocence is very overrated,’ replied Clarence, trying to work out what was going through the girl’s head right now. ‘It only gets you killed quicker.’

‘Then I’ll live a long time,’ she replied coldly. From what Clarence had seen of the Sultan’s palace, he didn’t really want to know what this poor girl had been through. Unfortunately, he couldn’t think of anything else to say.

‘You’re worried about Chris,’ said Palma, changing the subject in a very deliberate fashion. Clarence couldn’t help but be relieved, much to his shame. ‘You’re not sure what he’s going to do next.’

‘No,’ Clarence replied, resting his chin on the railing. ‘I’m not sure at all. But I trust him enough to believe it’ll be the right thing.’

Palma cocked her head to the side, looking at him thoughtfully.

‘You should get out of here,’ said Palma. ‘Being here isn’t helping you find that man you need to reach. And you can

fly. You should pick up Chris and fly away now, get back to your mission.'

'And leave you?' said Clarence, taken aback by the suggestion. 'Never.'

'My world is dead,' said Palma flatly, indicating the carnage around them. 'And it wasn't up to much before that. No, get back to what matters, Clarence. Leave me behind. I'm better off dead.'

Clarence put a hand on her shoulder. 'You may think that now, but there are better worlds than this one, believe me. And I'm going to make sure you get to one of them, away from this nightmare, you understand? You do believe me, don't you?'

Palma smiled weakly. 'Whoever heard of an angel lying to them?'

Cwej had persuaded Maande to give him a tour of the carrier's facilities, ostensibly so he could assess the vehicle's capacity for the great crusade ahead. Cwej, however, had other ideas.

'Incredible,' he enthused as they descended through the level they had initially been herded into, where the troops were crammed in like sardines. Over the intercom, Mor'yuchi had told them to go to sleep and the troops were so deeply under the god's influence that they had collapsed on the spot, dozens of soldiers slumped unconscious.

'The next level is even better,' said Maande gleefully. 'It's where we keep all the *really* good stuff.'

Cwej could see what she meant. The bottom level of the carrier was a vehicle bay, with a number of skimmers and other pieces of equipment.

'Wow,' said Cwej. 'How does Mor'yuchi get this stuff, with the blockade and all?'

'He's a great scientist,' enthused Maande. 'And his powers allow him to synthesize the materials necessary to construct this stuff through the application of sheer willpower. He can even transform living matter into his own image if he puts his mind to it.'

‘What a guy,’ said Cwej, looking around him. They were alone. ‘That might explain why you betrayed us so you could come back to him.’ He spun around on his heel, drawing his gun and pushing the barrel against Maande’s forehead. ‘Or is there some other reason?’

‘I thought you understood,’ snapped Maande fearlessly. ‘I thought you could see why Mor’yuchi’s so important.’

‘All I can see is you sucking up to one of the gods, when yesterday you were determined to destroy them all.’ He adjusted his finger on the trigger. ‘What’s got into you, Maande?’

‘Oh, stop whining,’ snarled Maande. ‘What does it matter? I got you to the palace. What more do you want? Now, are you going to shoot me or let me go?’

There was a long silence. Cwej kept the gun where it was.

Maande sighed, exasperated. ‘Well, do something. You can’t just carry me around in a box all day.’

Cwej’s lips moved as he repeated what she’d just said. ‘In a box... that’s it.’

‘What?’ she demanded.

‘Sorry. Gotta go.’ He tossed the gun into the air, catching it by the barrel. He slammed the butt of the weapon into the side of Maande’s head and she crumpled to the ground, stunned.

He ran over to the bay doors and hit the release button. He had to get back to the palace. If his hunch was right - and it was one of the stupidest theories he’d ever come up with - then the mission wasn’t over yet. He could come back for Clarence and Palma once he’d found Sevic.

As a ramp lowered itself, dragging along the ground as the carrier continued its relentless journey of destruction, Cwej jumped into one of the skimmers.

* * *

Clarence and Palma spun around as Mor’yuchi let out a hideous bellow, collapsing to the deck in a heap. They approached the god carefully, as a crowd of his followers scurried around Mor’yuchi, helping him to his feet. Palma exchanged a furtive, disappointed glance with Clarence.

Clearly he had shared her secret hope, her wish that Mor'yuchi had just dropped dead.

But the god was alive. He rubbed the side of his head, pushing away the eager hands that tried to minister to him.

'Find me Maande!' he bellowed. 'Bring the girl here. She's in trouble.'

'You seem unduly concerned,' said Clarence flatly, and Palma worried that he would overstep the mark.

'I care for all my servants,' said Mor'yuchi quietly. 'I am not like these other gods, as I said. I recruit by persuasion and rationality; I reward loyalty and hard work.'

'A real liberal,' said Clarence.

Mor'yuchi was about to reply when Maande was brought up from the lower levels, rubbing the side of her head. A purple bruise was developing at one temple.

Palma watched Clarence as he looked between the god and his follower with interest.

'Chris Cwej attacked me,' said Maande. 'Knocked me unconscious.'

'What?' shouted Mor'yuchi. 'I will not suffer my loyal servants being assaulted.'

'He took a skimmer and -'

'I do not care about the skimmer,' snapped Mor'yuchi. 'All that matters is your safety. And the betrayal of those around us.' He turned to Clarence. 'I tried to deal with you reasonably,' he hissed. 'But it seems that was not possible. Guards, seize them!'

It was simplicity itself to follow the vast tracks left by Mor'yuchi's troop carrier all the way back to the Sultan's palace. The skimmer Cwej had stolen was a nifty little thing, with a range of interesting weapons thrown in with the package, so he made good time, blasting any obstacles or NMA troops who got in his way. The tracks came to an end at the bottom of the hill on which the palace stood, so, with a heavy plasma cannon he had found in the back of the skimmer slung over one shoulder, Cwej abandoned the vehicle and clambered up the hill on foot. Mor'yuchi's troops

had taken a substantial chunk out of the palace walls, so Cwej wandered through the gap. Inside was exactly the kind of disarray he remembered from his last visit: people running around like headless chickens, their perceptions scrambled by the broken Belief Amplifier. If one came too near him, Cwej simply blasted a bit of masonry away with the cannon and they scrambled for cover.

The room Clarence had spent most of the night in, the one he had described to Cwej and Palma while they searched for Sevic, was not far away from the throne room they had been initially brought to, late the previous night. It took Cwej a few minutes to find, but eventually he stood in a room with the various torture devices Clarence had described. And in that room there was the box Cwej was looking for, the inhabitant of which he had come to find. He hoped he was right, and that this hadn't been a wasted journey. He set to work on the box's latch.

Cwej had once read an article on the dawn of artificial intelligence, way back in the twentieth century. It had described how early robots - rudimentary devices with one simple arm and a 2-D camera for an eye - had only the most basic forms of pattern recognition. Show them a picture of a paper clip, and they would recognize it, but only from exactly the same angle, in exactly the same position. Move it around a bit, or overlap it with another paper clip, and the simple-minded machines would think it was something else altogether. It was a bit like that with Clarence sometimes - although blessed with enormous intelligence, he lacked intuition and a capacity for lateral thinking. Qualities Cwej possessed by the sackful.

The box opened and Cwej reached in to deal with the sleeping occupant. He slid his hand under the gimp's chin, and loosened the clasp of its leather mask. He slid the mask off, careful not to wake the snoring man, and sighed with relief. His hunch had paid off. Revealed before him was the piggy face of Teran Sevic, the man he and Clarence had gone to Dellah to find. It had obviously never occurred to the literal-minded angel that the famous politician and the

debased slave could ever be the same person. But Cwej was cynical enough, and familiar enough with the private lives of politicians, to have made that leap.

Well, he could congratulate himself on his cleverness later. They needed to get moving. 'Come on, you old bastard,' he muttered, slapping Sevic's face a few times to wake him.

Cwej had little time left. Benny had to be close to activating the node by now.

Clarence kicked aside Mor'yuchi's guards with minimal effort. Palma watched the angel with awe, the graceful way he cast the soldiers aside as if they were nothing but toys. She noticed with admiration that he never threw them down hard enough to seriously hurt them, or so far that they rolled off the deck and fell to their deaths. If anything, he was being kind to them.

'So, you care for your people then?' Clarence was saying to Mor'yuchi. 'A real humanitarian god, are we?' He tossed aside another guard with a flick of his wrist. 'Then why are you getting them to attack me instead of trying yourself? They're only getting hurt.' He drew his sword with one hand, using the other to fight off his battered assailant. 'Are you a god, or just a big girl?'

Mor'yuchi laughed, reaching out into the air in front of him. Matter began to coalesce between his fingers. 'Very well,' said the god. 'An angel versus a god, yes? It should be interesting.' A sword formed in his outstretched hand, the metal appearing in a blur of energy. 'Guards! Leave him to me.' He stepped forward, swinging his newly formed blade.

'Nice party trick,' replied Clarence. 'Metal from thin air. Cute. How about this?' He flicked a switch on the hilt of his sword, and the blade burst into flame.

Mor'yuchi shrugged, unimpressed. 'I'm afraid that one leaves me cold.' And he lunged for Clarence with his sword, bringing the blade down so fast Palma saw it as a blur.

Clarence parried the blow with a clash of his own sword, but the impact sent him reeling. Mor'yuchi went for a low swipe, trying to literally cut Clarence's legs out from under

him. The angel flipped over Mor'yuchi's head, and before the god could turn around Clarence's blade was buried in his back. The flame ignited Mor'yuchi's body and it collapsed to the deck, a charred mess. Clarence pulled out the blade in one motion.

'I didn't want to do that,' said Clarence, regret tainting his voice.

'You had to,' said Palma. 'At least it's over now.'

'Oh, don't speak too soon,' said a familiar voice from behind them. They turned to see one of the guards Clarence had injured stand up, his features twisting into the purple-skinned grimace of Mor'yuchi.

'A god is only what his followers make him, don't you think?' said the new Mor'yuchi, leaping over their heads with inhuman agility. Clarence pushed Palma behind him as the god picked up his sword from the dead hand of his previous body. 'We're omnipotent - didn't they tell you that at school? You didn't think these vessels were really me, did you? Whoever is in my sight can become me.'

Palma thought intently as the angel and the god did battle once more. It was obvious that Mor'yuchi thought he couldn't be defeated; that was clear from his tone. But Palma didn't believe that, no matter how many times he came back from the dead. She was sure that the smug god had given away some clue to how he could be defeated, somewhere in his arrogant taunts, if she could just work it out.

'Aaargh!' screamed Clarence as Mor'yuchi's blade dug deep into his shoulder. Burning energy rippled out of the wound, and it looked as if the angel was made of light itself. Spirals of pure energy whipped up Mor'yuchi's sword, earthing themselves in his body and causing him to explode in a puff of ashes.

Clarence's wound healed itself with a fizz of electricity, but the angel still looked seriously ill. He stumbled over to Palma.

'You've got to get away,' he whispered hoarsely. 'I was constructed by a far higher technology than you've ever known. If I get ruptured like that again, the balances within me will be disrupted - they won't be containable. The

feedback if I explode could destroy this entire carrier. Get out of here while you can. I'll at least take that bastard with me.'

Palma gripped Clarence's hand in hers. 'No way. You said you wouldn't leave me, and I'm not going to leave you. We'll get him.'

Clarence was about to argue when another of Mor'yuchi's guards transformed into the image of his god, running to attack the angel. Pain clearly racking his body, Clarence turned to defend himself. Palma looked around, trying to find something that might help. One of the guards had dropped a pistol on the deck, so she ran to grab it. She turned to shoot this new Mor'yuchi, but he was engaged in battle with Clarence, and Palma didn't trust her aim enough to risk firing so close to her friend.

She looked around. The remaining guards were cheering their god on, while Maande watched intently, eyes wild and sweat pouring down her face.

Of course! Mor'yuchi's essence had to be in her. The god had been hurt when Chris knocked her out; he had been enraged by the attack on her.

Clarence's flaming sword was knocked out of his hand. Mor'yuchi rolled, scooping it up, and used the flat of the blade to knock the angel off his feet. Clarence keeled over, skin smoking from where the burning weapon had touched him.

Palma ran towards Maande, gun raised. She hoped the guards were too involved in the fight to try to stop her.

'Now,' said Mor'yuchi, raising Clarence's sword. 'Now you die by your own sword. I do hope the irony isn't lost on you.'

Maande turned as Palma ran up to her, hastily placing the gun at the woman's breast. Palma hoped she was right, because otherwise she was about to see one of her closest allies die by her hand.

She pulled the trigger.

SACRIFICIAL FLAMES

Jason banged his fists hard on the door of the small room that he had been locked in. 'Come on,' he shouted. 'Let me out!'

He sank to the floor, realizing that his efforts were futile. He had been hammering on the door for over a minute, ever since James had left, but no one was interested in him. Everyone in the place was concentrating on the sacrifice in progress.

Jason felt so helpless. The room was empty apart from a table, a chair, a ceiling-mounted light and a door that was locked tightly shut. He hoped that Benny wasn't in trouble. She was their only hope now.

He reached up and banged on the door one more time.

Suddenly a small rectangular panel opened in the door, and an arm shot through it, holding a cup.

'I've brought you some soup,' a voice said. It was James.

Jason looked suspiciously at the cup, then took it from James's grasp. He sniffed it. It smelt lovely - minestrone if he wasn't mistaken - but he knew it probably contained some form of sedative, so he decided not to risk trying it.

'So have you come to take me down to be sacrificed?' Jason asked.

James pressed his face closer to the door, and Jason was able to see it clearly. 'It's a truly wonderful day today,' he said.

In James's eyes Jason could see a tremendous enthusiasm burning. It was clear that this man was very excited by what he was doing.

‘Jason?’ James asked. ‘Why don’t you follow Tehke? Can’t you see that he’s real? Can’t you see that worshipping him only makes people happy?’

Jason stared at the unusual priest. He seemed to be on the surface a stereotypical preacher, desperate to convert anyone who would listen. Underneath, it seemed that he was just a normal guy who had somehow been caught up in a situation that put him way out of his depth. Jason wondered if this was the Reverend James that Benny had spoken of. The one who had seemed quite nice and friendly, who had chatted with Benny on many occasions before the gods arrived, who had been very humble in his faith. Had he now turned into this extremist nutter?

‘If Tehke’s so great,’ said Jason, ‘then why is he killing people?’

James was silent for a few moments, as if considering his response carefully.

‘Tehke kills in order to purify,’ James said. ‘There are people here who don’t believe in Tehke, who follow other religions. Some don’t have any faith at all. Tehke hates that. He created us, and yet we snub his wishes.’

‘What bullshit,’ Jason said. ‘What people believe is their own private business. They’re not affecting you in any way. In fact, with your attitude they’ll probably make a special effort to stay away from you.’

‘Oh, come on, Jason,’ James said. ‘You think I’m going to listen to moral advice from you? I’ve heard of your reputation. I’ve heard of your career in “adult” fiction. You’re more immoral than Aesop’s evil twin.’

‘What? What the hell are you talking about? Have you ever read any of my books.’

James paused once more. ‘Well, no, but I’ve heard about them in the religious press. They told me all I needed to know to condemn your work.’

‘But you’ve never read them. You’ve only been told about them by the moral guardians you entrust to give you a daily dose of prejudiced news. You trust them because they tell you what you want to hear. Tell you that you’re so good while

the rest of the world is so bad. They never point out that, in your own way, you're just as fucked up. Your viewpoint is unbelievably screwed, you know? You've never made the effort to try to understand my side of the argument before coming in all guns blazing and slagging them off to anyone who wants to listen to your ramblings. Why can't you just read the bloody books? Why can't you listen to other people's views? Why can't you just try to see both sides of an argument before leaping to conclusions?'

Jason sighed. It was clear that this man was so set in his ways, so unbelievably prejudiced and intolerant, despite his claims to be caring, that it would be a near impossible task to convince him otherwise, no matter how good Jason's logic was. Jason wondered whether he should try to reach an arm through the door, to grab James and not let him go until he let him out. But the hatch was too small, so any escape efforts he might make would fail. He decided to keep trying to argue James round to his way of thinking. OK, so it may be futile, but it was the only option left to him.

'So now you're making amends for the sinners' past misdeeds?' Jason said.

'Yes,' replied James. 'When we kill people, we're doing them a favour. Their lives are wrong, and it's up to us to correct them. If they refuse to conform, they risk polluting others with their blasphemies.'

'So one day you're preaching tolerance, the next you're saying that people should be killed because they don't believe the same shit you do? I'm sorry, but I think there's a slight contradiction here.'

'Not at all,' James said. 'We're tolerant of those who believe, but not of those who don't want to help the people - those who are only out for themselves.'

'But people can't help how they are, James. Some people may be more selfish than others, but you can't just go around telling everyone that they're wrong. There is no black and white when it comes to morals. Fine, you may hold a certain set of beliefs yourself, but there's no need to make other people's lives a misery because of it. Believing in

something is about deciding inside yourself what feels right. Whatever that is, you can't choose it. You can't just say, "I'll stop believing in God X just because a preacher says God X is evil and God Y is good." ' "

'But even if you're right,' James argued, 'it only means that the people's nature is a punishment for sins in a previous life.'

'In that case,' sneered Jason, 'why do they need to be punished again? Surely living a life without knowing the truth is punishment enough. Anyway, who are you to judge?'

'I'm a High Priest of the Burning One. And anyway, you're forgetting something. Killing nonbelievers is in the Holy Decree.'

It is written. Undeniable evidence. Even without knowing Tehke personally it's clear what is and what isn't a sin.'

'What shite,' Jason said. 'There've been wars over this for centuries. The meanings of a few lines of dialogue, all badly mistranslated anyway, has caused endless fighting. How the hell can you use this decree to back up your arguments when every statement can be met with something along the lines of "you can't eat bananas on Wednesdays", or some other bit of text conveniently forgotten because it doesn't fit in with your world-view to follow it. Face it, James: you Tehkeans are bigots: and you don't have a fucking clue how stupid you all look.'

'But it's in the decree.'

'Which was written over five hundred years ago! By a group of priests from various backgrounds, too.' Jason thought back to the information file he had read on Tehke, trying desperately to remember anything that might help his argument. 'Who edited the decree, James? Who decided what was and what was not holy? Who decided what should and should not be included in it?'

'Tehke did, and told our prophets so.'

'But how- do you know? How do you really know that at least one of the prophets wasn't lying?'

'Er... well..

'You don't, do you? And that's what all this comes down to in the end. You can never be one hundred per cent sure about anything you say, and that's why religion exists. It's there for you to believe despite indications to the contrary. That's why all these gods running around the planet alive and well just doesn't ring true. True followers of a god should follow with their faith. They shouldn't have to see miracles and sacrifices and all the other parlour tricks just to be convinced.'

'Tehke, and Maa'lon - their actions were fulfilments of prophecy, not "parlour tricks" as you so blasphemously call them.'

'But isn't it all just a little too convenient? How everyone got exactly the kind of god they expected to get? How every little detail fits in with whatever image will give the gods the most followers?'

'I... I'm not sure. I doubted Maa'lon before he appeared to me, but his appearance convinced me that I'd been wrong to do so.'

'I thought you believed in Tehke.'

'I do,' said James. He sounded confident, but Jason could tell from the shakiness of his voice that he was struggling to compete with Jason's dissection of his beliefs. 'I never used to believe in Tehke,' James said. 'Not until he killed my Lord Maa'lon.'

'Doesn't that throw something of a spanner into your belief system?' Jason asked.

'Not at all. I simply had to modify my beliefs. Maa'lon never told me about the Pantheon, but I now believe that the Pantheon is the true calling. The Pantheon explains how there can be many gods walking the planet. They are all real, but are all arch-gods, under the might of Tehke, the One God.'

'So what you're saying is that everyone who has ever had a religion is right? Seeing as everyone is being visited by their gods, it definitely seems that way.'

James was silent, clearly troubled by Jason's words. 'I'm not sure,' he eventually said. 'I hadn't really thought about that.'

Finally Jason was getting somewhere.

'I tell you what,' Jason said. 'You unlock this door, and walk away, and no one need ever know what you've done. I'll prove to you that Tehke is not the One True God. If he is so powerful, then nothing I can do will harm him.'

Another silence.

'I still don't believe you,' James said, 'but you seem determined to prove me wrong. You'll be killed as soon as you get near Tehke, but if that's what you want..

'Just let me out,' Jason pleaded.

There was a clicking and beeping, followed by the clunking of the lock mechanisms disengaging.

Jason pushed the door open and walked out of the room to see James standing by the door, looking sheepish.

'Thanks,' said Jason. 'You'll be rewarded for this someday, I'm sure.'

James looked in agony. 'I don't know,' he said. 'I truly don't know. But if anything you say is true... Well, I have to let you learn for yourself the error of your ways.' James closed his eyes as if saying a quick prayer of the 'what have I done?' variety, then turned away without saying anything and hurried down the corridor towards the temple.

Jason waited for just over a minute, just enough time to let James get back to Tehke without being suspected of any misconduct, before he too made his way to the temple. He hoped Benny was having more luck than he was.

Several minutes earlier, Benny had been desperately wrestling with the handle of the door that led to the so-called 'forbidden room'. She was surprised that there had been no guards outside, given the room's status. She assumed that Tehke needed nil the followers present to be in one place before he went ahead with whatever ghastly plan he had in mind.

Eventually, the door clicked open, and Benny cautiously made her way into the room.

It was dark inside, but a dim light shone in one corner of the room, partially illuminating the rest. It smelt strongly of a butcher's shop, and Benny found herself holding her breath at times to avoid inhaling the foul stench.

On a far wall were a row of brightly lit transparent pipes, through which a strange energy seemed to pulse. The pipes came from a gap in the ceiling and led down into a large metal box that Benny assumed was the reactor. She reached into her rucksack and removed the schematic of the reactor. She took out a pen torch and flashed it over the box. 'Strange,' she muttered to herself. There was no sign of the panel that she was supposed to plug the node into. She looked around the room, but this was the only thing that could possibly be any sort of reactor.

She flashed her torch on to the schematic and compared it to what she could see in the room. Well, that was the reactor all right. She followed the path of the pipes up into the ceiling. According to the schematic, the panel she needed was right at the top of the device.

She strained to see in the darkness, but realized that, if the panel was that high, she wouldn't be able to reach it. She wondered how the power station workers used to. Why build an access panel so high?

She walked around the room, looking for something she might be able to stand on.

There was a solid crunch under Benny's foot and she knelt down to see what she had stepped in.

'Oh God,' she exclaimed. She had trodden in a rotting human skull. She flashed her torch around the floor and saw that there were at least three bodies in the room. No wonder this was the forbidden room. It had to be where Tehke left his victims.

Benny's concentration was disturbed by the grinding noise of machinery. A panel somewhere above the reactor creaked open, and through the crack seeped light. She heard the distant sound of chanting, and suddenly realized exactly

what she was missing. The panel she needed wasn't at the top of the room she was in, but at the bottom of the temple. She thought back to the temple and remembered the altar in the centre. That had to be it. The altar had to be concealing the panel she needed.

The grinding and whirring noises continued and a metal platform was lowered into the middle of the room. The platform tipped itself up and a large object fell from it, landing on the ground with a loud thud. Benny ran over to see what it was.

'Oh no,' she said. 'Heldov!' She examined the man's body and saw numerous mutilations. He had been stabbed several times, in every area where it mattered. A knife protruded from his chest, right where his heart would have been. She felt for a pulse, but he was already dead. 'I'm so sorry,' she whispered. She planted a light kiss on Heldov's forehead, then walked over to the now silent platform. She looked up at the gap through which it had been lowered.

'I wonder...' she said out loud. The platform probably led up to the altar. If she could somehow get up to the panel without Tehke seeing her ...

It was worth a shot, and right now Benny was running out of ideas.

The whirring came again and the platform began to rise into the air. Benny leapt on to it and shuffled into position. It felt peculiarly morbid to be lying in the same spot where a dead man had been moments before.

The platform soon reached the top of the room, and Benny looked around frantically for the panel she needed to plug the node into.

'Damn,' she said, as she saw the reactor pipes disappearing into the wall. So much for that plan. She tried to jump off the platform but it was too late. It was now moving up a metal chute that would lead her straight into the arms of Tehke. Benny desperately tried to get out, slamming her full body weight against the walls on either side, but they were solid.

In moments the platform emerged into the temple and Benny saw that it was filled with hundreds of Tehke's worshippers. She looked around and realized that the platform formed the top of the altar. This was not good.

She tried to sit up, but was forced down by a pair of heavy hands.

'Who the hell are you?' said a coarse, demonic voice. She craned her neck to see who was speaking. It was a man whose

head appeared to be on fire.

'Tehke, the Burning One, right?' Benny said. 'Bernice Summerfield. Pleased to meet you.'

'Yet another nonbeliever invades our sanctuary,' sighed Tehke. 'We're going to have to get some better guard dogs.'

'Erm,' said Benny, 'would you mind letting me go? It's rather uncomfortable lying here. I'm really not at all tired.'

Tehke laughed. 'Sorry, girlfriend, we've got something of a rule going at the moment. All nonbelievers get sacrificed. That Jason Kane was going to be next.'

Damn, thought Benny. They got Jason.

'But since you're already in position, we'll have to do you first.'

Benny breathed a sigh of relief. At least Jason was alive, wherever he was.

'Your knife, sir,' said a familiar voice. Benny looked over to see James Harker handing Tehke an engraved ceremonial knife. A knife still dripping with blood.

'James!' Benny said. 'Can't you do something about this? Make them see sense.'

James shook his head. 'I'm sorry, Bernice. Tehke knows best.'

James turned to go and left through one of the exits.

'Give her regards to Jason!' called Tehke after him.

One of the worshippers pulled some leather straps across Benny's chest and legs, so she could be restrained without anyone having to hold her. Once the straps were fastened, she was confronted with the grinning face of Tehke looming

over her, knife in hand. He raised the knife and was about to jam it down into Benny's chest when he suddenly stopped.

He tossed the knife away and called over to one of his minions. 'I've decided to purify her with fire instead,' he said. 'It's about time we got this place cooking.'

A group of Tehke's followers hurried up to the altar and started pouring something that smelt highly flammable over Benny and over the altar itself. One of them brought rags, which he placed beneath the altar. He then lit a match and crouched to light them. That, anyway, was what the restrained Benny assumed.

'Well, now I know how a Christmas pudding feels,' sighed Benny. She could hear the crackling of fire beneath her. They were using the rags as a sort of fuse. She could feel the heat rising, the metal platform she lay on getting hotter and hotter. Any minute now, the flammable liquid would catch and burst into flames and she would die a horrible death. She made peace with the world and prayed that Jason was having more luck than she was. She supposed it was a form of universal justice. Thousands of Dellahans would die because of her, so what would one more matter? Stop it Bernice, she thought. Pull yourself together. You don't deserve to die, any more than the others do. There's too much still left to do. Too many adventures to have.

The heat grew unbearable, and Benny knew that the altar would ignite at any second, roasting her in thousands of degrees of heat. Her head pounded at the stress of the situation, and everything went white.

Benny stood in front of a mirror, reaching down to feel the bulge of the child within her. Jason's child. Her hair was grey, but the child had made her feel young again. After years of marriage, they had finally managed it. Benny reached her hand up and placed it against the mirror. She was sad yet content. She had made her choices, and lived with them. What else was there to do, fudge the issues for ever? Avoid ever committing to anything? Benny felt the kick within her.

The ultimate commitment, and she had made it, trusted herself and taken the decision -

Which choice was right, which choice was wrong? Should you look after yourself or follow the greater good?

The dawn of the twenty-first century and Benny was on the moon, standing on the plain with Jason. They had decided to divorce, and the decision cut through her like a knife. She loved Jason so much. Her bit of rough, the lovable rogue. Yet here they were, getting divorced under painful circumstances, convinced they were doing the right thing. The tears gathered in her eyes as she told Jason that their marriage was over, but she still went through with it. So sure it was the right decision, the right thing to do -

You didn't understand him then. You weren't properly prepared. You 've learnt how to cope with him now. To live with his faults, and he with yours.

Back to the future. As she looked in the mirror, felt the child kick, Jason came up behind her, sliding his arms around the heavy swell.

'We make a good team,' he told her, and she found herself unable to disagree -

The perfect team? Together for ever? If it was always inevitable, why did they keep parting?

They had only just met. The first time she spoke his name.

'Oh, Jason...' she said, staring at his apparently dying body. Smoke billowed from a hole in the middle of his chest. She was crying, but she didn't feel involved. She cared for the guy, but she wasn't that bothered -

And now? Could you bear to lose him again? Should you keep him at a distance or hold him close?

'Close...' she moaned, drifting back into consciousness.

Benny realized that she was no longer being held in place, and rolled over, falling to the ground. Instinctively she rolled away and glanced over at the altar just in time to see it consumed in the fireball meant for her. Next to the altar was a grinning Jason, knife in hand.

Benny's head still hurt with the fumes from her near-death experience. She tried to get her bearings and soon found that her vision had cleared and her head had stopped swirling. She looked around the chamber to see Tehke's followers rushing forward to try to reach Jason. She glanced over to see that her ex-husband had leapt down from the main stage and was running to the side of the stage where Tehke stood. Benny couldn't believe it. Jason was actually going to try to take on Tehke.

'Jason,' she gasped. 'Don't do it!'

But it was too late. She saw Jason punch Tehke in the face. Despite the momentum of Jason's fist knocking him back several steps, Tehke seemed unfazed.

'Of course,' Benny overheard one of the worshippers say, 'Tehke is invincible to all human interference. It's in the Book.'

Tehke appeared to glance in Benny's direction, shot her an evil grin, then turned and lunged out a fiery arm towards Jason.

Jason ducked back, and reached for his blaster. He raised it and fired several shots at Tehke's head, but they appeared to have no effect.

'Go on, Benny!' he shouted. 'Go on!'

'Shit,' Benny said, under her breath. So that's what this display of heroics was all about. He was trying to provide a distraction so that she could activate the transference.

'You utter bastard,' she said. She watched as one of the worshippers rushed forward and punched Jason in the chest. Jason shot him and the man fell to the ground. Two more worshippers leapt on Jason, who began firing his blaster wildly in an effort to shake them off. Another follower lunged forward, shoving a knife into Jason's back. Jason looked to the heavens and screamed in agony.

'Go, Benny!' he yelled.

Benny's eyes swam with tears. This was so unfair.

She got up and ran over to the altar, the flames having died back as they had consumed the fuel. It appeared that everyone's attention was focused on Jason and Tehke. No

one was watching her. She reached her hand out to touch a panel on the side of the altar. The heat was intense, and her forehead dripped with sweat, but she had to do this.

Damn you, Jason Kane.

The panel was loose and Benny managed to slide it open. She looked inside at the mass of circuitry. It was impressive the way Tehke had managed to disguise all this high technology with an ancient stone facade.

She looked over at Jason. Blood was pouring down his face, and he was clearly in agony. He was aimlessly firing his blaster at anyone who got near him. Every so often he would thwack someone over the head with it. All this time, he was kicking and punching, doing his very best to avoid being captured. It was a valiant effort, and Benny had never seen anyone fight so hard. Despite his efforts, it was clear that he was failing. The crowd of worshippers were queuing up to get a piece of Jason, and while this was going on Tehke was standing at the side of the room, laughing.

Benny saw Jason look over to where she was. Tears and blood were streaming down his face, and Benny saw a look of determination and pure anger unlike any she had ever seen on him. It was as if he had been possessed by a rabid beast, and was placing all his energy in this one effort to give Benny enough time to complete the mission.

‘Kill him,’ shouted Tehke, directing his followers to further intensify their assault. ‘Tear the infidel to pieces!’

Jason seemed about to collapse. As soon as his guard was down, Tehke’s followers would rip him apart. She doubted he could last for more than a few seconds.

Benny froze in indecision. Any second now Jason would disappear beneath his assailants. He would be clawed apart by the bare hands of Tehke's followers, enraged into bloodlust by their psychotic god. He had come to rescue her, to give her time to activate the node. Sacrificing himself for her, so she could save humanity. She would have liked to think he didn't have it in him, but that would have been a lie. He had always been a far better person than she had ever given him credit for. She looked across at him, fighting not only for his life, but for her life and the lives of millions of others.

Benny looked at Jason's face. He was in such pain.

Benny looked at the altar. The future depended on her.

Benny looked at Jason's face. He was in such pain.

She was in such pain.

The future depended on her.

Sod this, she thought. The future could wait.

She was about to run towards Jason, but quickly realized that one extra person would be fairly useless against Tehke's mob. There had to be another way to rescue him. She looked around the temple for any sign of something that could help her, but there was nothing. She looked back at the altar, and suddenly had an idea. She reached over for the gurney that Heldov had been brought in on. She checked the wheels, and, as she had suspected, saw that it was on tracks. It was an old power cart. She followed the tracks with her eyes, and was pleased to see that they led straight into the path of Tehke's mob.

She grabbed the back of the gurney and pushed it with all her strength. She jumped on to the back of it and held on

while the gurney rolled down the tracks. Benny felt like a little kid hanging on to the back of a shopping trolley. This was fun. She just hoped it would work.

The gurney quickly picked up speed, and Benny heard the wheels screeching. She hoped they wouldn't derail.

Several of Tehke's followers saw the gurney coming and jumped out of the way. Several others didn't, and were run over by the hurtling trolley. But the collision caused the gurney to stop suddenly and Benny was thrown forward on to its surface. She tumbled off, on to the ground, and looked up to see Jason standing over her, panting desperately. She had never seen him looking so bad.

She stood up and pulled him on to the gurney. 'Come on!' she said.

Jason stumbled wearily on to the gurney and Benny grabbed his gun from his hand.

The followers of Tehke had noticed that Benny was free and some had run over to check the altar for sabotage. Others were looking expectantly at Tehke, as if waiting for orders. It was a tense stand-off. There was silence as Benny waited for the worshippers to attack her and they waited to see what Tehke wanted them to do.

'What?' Tehke yelled, watching from several metres away.

'She's survived the sacrifice,' Benny heard James Harker say.

'So?' Tehke said frantically.

'But... but...' James stammered, 'it's in your teachings. "We must not harm that which we would sacrifice".'

Tehke hit his forehead with one of his flaming hands. 'Right,' he said. 'I forgot.'

Benny looked to the edge of the room and saw that the gurney tracks led off through one of the exits. Again, Benny pushed the gurney furiously, slamming it into the one follower who was still on the tracks, knocking him out of her way. Once enough momentum had built up, she lifted her feet and clung to the back of the gurney, as she had before. It flew down the tracks, out of the temple.

Benny glanced back and saw the confused worshippers starting to follow. They were running after her but the distraction of dogma had enabled her to build up enough speed to leave them far behind.

The tracks led down a steep slope which seemed to go further and further into the depths of the mountain. Eventually, the ground levelled out and the gurney came to a gentle halt. Benny helped Jason off and supported him as they made their way down a corridor.

At least Jason was able to stagger, she reflected, albeit with her support. She looked at his blood-streaked face. He'd certainly taken a battering, and there'd been that knife wound to his back. But there was no time to do anything about his injuries now. She hoped there was no internal bleeding.

Jason's face was covered in blotches of purple and his eyes were puffed up. Several cuts were clotting, and blood was drying in his hair, sticking it together at peculiar angles.

'You'll be all right,' she told him. 'Just hang in there.'

It took several minutes for Benny to reorientate herself. The passage they had travelled down after leaving the temple was not the same one they had entered it through, so Benny had been forced to try to work out a way through the maze of the power station's corridors that would lead them back to the entrance to the mountain. Getting Jason out of the way of Tehke's followers - out of the way of their planned destruction of the power station - was the only way she could think of that would save him.

They were in what looked like a storage room when Benny suddenly became aware of a strange hissing sound. She stopped suddenly and Jason murmured wearily. She told him to be quiet, then listened carefully.

No, it wasn't a hissing sound. It was the sound of rushing water.

She led Jason around the corner from which the sound appeared to be coming and smiled as she saw the source of the noise.

The hot river that they had passed earlier ran straight through the centre of the mountain, and, judging by the canal-like artificial banks of the river, it had been channelled through this room by the power-station workers.

Still supporting Jason with her left shoulder, Benny reached into her right-hand pocket, pulled out Heldov's map and shook it open. She looked at the river, glanced back the way they came, then smiled. She could tell from the look of the river exactly where they were in the mountain. The river would run down from this room, past the path they had crossed earlier, and out into the snowy mountain exterior. Out to where the other villagers were waiting.

'Hang on,' she said, placing Jason down on the floor next to the river and shoving the map back into her pocket. 'I'll be back in a minute.'

Benny ran back into the storage room and saw her plan come to life. In the corner of the room were seven large barrels, which judging by the texture of their surface were made of ceramic silver. In other words, they would be impervious to heat. Benny ran over to the barrels and opened one up. The barrel was filled with a liquid which gave off a stench so bad it made Benny feel sick. She quickly replaced the lid and moved over to the next barrel. She prised the lid open and was glad to see that this one was empty. She sniffed the inside of the barrel, and was pleased to find that there was no peculiar smell.

She tipped the barrel on to its side and rolled it towards the room through which the river ran.

She knelt down beside Jason, who was lying still.

'Are you OK?' she asked.

Jason nodded. Relieved to see he was still conscious, Benny helped him to sit up. He looked at her with wide-open eyes. He seemed to be recovering from the exhaustion of fighting Tehke's minions, even if his wounds were still hurting. Whatever the exact nature of his present condition was, it was clear he would be unable to contribute anything to the mission for a while.

‘Benny,’ Jason said, his voice coarse. He coughed and a trickle of blood spilt out from the side of his mouth. He reached up a hand and stroked Benny’s cheek.

‘It’s all right,’ she said. ‘I want you to listen carefully.’ She pointed to the barrel. ‘I want you to get inside that barrel. It’s heatproof so you won’t get burnt in the waters. The current should take you downstream, and once you’re out in the open the villagers will pick you up and let you out.’

Jason did not look convinced. ‘You’re crazy!’ he wheezed. ‘You really think that can work?’

Benny started to shrug, then quickly noticed the fear in Jason’s eyes and started to nod her head. ‘It should be fine,’ she said. ‘Things could get nasty around here, and if I fail to stop Tehke... well, at least I’ll know you’re OK.’

Jason smiled at her. ‘Ah well,’ he said. ‘In for a penny.’

Benny pulled out her comlink. She adjusted the frequency to match that of the villagers, and began to speak into it.

‘Hello?’ she said. ‘Is anyone there? Can you hear me?’

‘We hear you,’ said a voice.

‘In a minute or two,’ Benny told them, ‘a barrel’s going to come downstream containing Jason.’

‘A barrel?’ The villager’s voice sounded sceptical. ‘What do you mean “a barrel”?’

‘Exactly that, I’m afraid,’ said Benny. ‘Think Vulmey Falls. I haven’t got time to explain. I just need you to pick it up and let him out. He’s going to need some serious first aid.’

There was a pause as the villager absorbed Benny’s words. ‘Right you are,’ he said. ‘We’ll be on the lookout for this barrel. We’ll sort him out.’

‘Thanks,’ Benny said. ‘Bernice out.’

She pushed a button on the comlink to break the connection and placed the device back into her pocket.

Benny swung the barrel round so that the opening was facing Jason. She began to help him on to his knees so that he could crawl into it.

‘Benny, wait,’ Jason said. ‘There’s something I have to say to you. Something I have to ask you. We saw how powerful Tehke is. We both know that we might never see each other

again. And if we don't... well, I could never live with myself if I didn't ask.'

'Ask me what?'

Jason looked longingly at her, and she experienced a brief flashback to the day they first met, and to his instant yet unconventional appeal.

'Benny,' he said. 'Do you still love me?'

Benny wiped the tears she hadn't noticed were there away from her cheek.

'Jason, I... I'm not sure...'

'Just answer the question Benny.' Jason's face screwed up in agony, but Benny did not know whether this was caused by his physical injuries or his emotions.

Benny shook her head. 'I really don't know. It's been too long. It's...'

She remembered all the good times they had together. All the good things Jason had done. All the times he had done his best to make her happy. All the times they had enjoyed each other's company and the knowledge that, while they were together, neither of them need ever be lonely. And she remembered the bad times. The times Jason had been infuriatingly awkward for one reason or another. She remembered all the times the relationship had gone off the rails. And all the times it was her fault.

'Benny,' Jason said. 'Tell me your answer!'

Benny looked at her husband through her tear-clouded eyes. She reached forward, kissed him on the forehead and gave him a hug. After a pause that lasted for all eternity, she nervously whispered four words into his ear. 'I love you, Jason.' She smiled. 'Whatever bad stuff happened in the past,' she told him, 'I can see that none of it really matters.

We were meant to be together.' Another long pause. 'And I love you.'

Jason smiled, then burst into a chuckle. 'I know. I just had to hear you say it. Funny, didn't think you could still do it. I love you, Benny.'

They kissed, paused for several moments in each other's arms. She wanted to stay like that for ever. Her and Jason, for ever.

They separated their embrace awkwardly, neither wanting to pull away.

'You'd better get going,' Benny said.

Jason nodded, and eased himself into the barrel. Benny reached over and lifted up the lid. She grasped Jason's hand one more time before letting go.

'I love you, Jason Kane,' she said. 'Whatever happens, just remember that.'

Jason smiled nervously, and Benny pressed the barrel lid down, locking it into place.

Slowly, she eased the barrel on to the edge of the river, then gave it a push. The barrel sank into the river, disappearing under the water for a few moments before bobbing to the surface. Soon, the fast-moving current was pushing the barrel downstream, and in moments it had disappeared from view.

'Goodbye, Jason,' Benny said quietly.

Benny had expected to bump into the worshippers who had been pursuing her and Jason, but there was no sign of them. Tehke must have called them back to the temple. They were probably too important to risk losing somewhere in an unfamiliar building. The lack of confrontations along the way meant that Benny had got all her strength back by the time she reached the temple. She felt ready for anything. She was doing this for Jason now. For the universe, and for Jason, and she knew what she had to do. There was only one way to get the node in place now, and sneaking around behind Tehke's back just wouldn't work. It was too late in the day for cat-and-mouse games. Benny walked into the temple and saw that the crowd of worshippers were back in their meditation positions.

At the front of the room, on the raised stage, stood Tehke. The god stood with his arms outstretched and was reciting some creed or other to his followers. Benny was not at all

surprised to see that James Harker - a man now so different from the friendly chap Benny had shared pints with at St Oscar's - was standing next to Tehke, hanging on the god's every word.

Benny took a deep breath, bowed her head slightly, then marched towards the stage.

Harker was the first to notice her, and she saw him move forward to tell Tehke. The god was in the middle of a chant, however, and, realizing this, Harker decided to hold back. As she got closer to Tehke, his eyes snapped open. He looked over at her and a Cheshire-cat grin flashed across his face.

'Excuse me, children,' he said to the crowd, 'but I have to speak to our young sacrifice. Return to your meditation.'

Tehke hopped down from the stage and walked up to Benny.

'So,' he said, 'you've decided to join us once more.'

Benny nodded. 'I see the way, my Lord. Forgive me for my past misdeeds.'

Tehke was clearly surprised by this. Benny had thought that he might see through her deception immediately. The gods certainly had the telepathic capability to detect a big fat juicy lie sitting on the surface of her consciousness. Yet for some reason Tehke's response to her claim of loyalty was not one of scepticism. Benny had no explanation for his unexpected credulity. Maybe the sheer amount of concentrated belief in the chamber was sending Tehke too many signals. Maybe the alpha-wave inhibitors were stopping him reading her mind. Whatever the reason, Benny had taken a gamble, and now she was going to milk this situation dry.

'It was Jason,' she said.

Tehke looked intrigued, but bore the expression of a cat toying with an injured bird.

'Jason's dead,' Beany continued. 'I got him away, but I suddenly realized that he was interrupting the greatest day in the history of this planet.' She gestured around the room. 'These people', she said, 'are so unbelievably lucky. You were

going to kill... to sacrifice me, and you almost did, but then, at the last moment before Jason released me, I had a vision.'

'A vision?' Tehke said. 'What are you talking about?'

'I only realized it a few minutes ago. It was a vision of you, and I suddenly knew that you were the fabled saviour of Dellah. Tehke of the Pantheon. The One True God.'

One of Tehke's eyebrows was raised. 'So you've joined our flock?' he said.

Benny nodded.

'Er, master?' said James, who had just stepped up beside Tehke. 'Shouldn't we finish the sacrifice?'

'Hold on, James,' Tehke said. 'The sacrifices remove the nonbelievers. If she believes, then she'll live. I need to know for sure.' A fiery tendril reached out from Tehke and touched Benny on the forehead. She gritted her teeth as she felt her head getting hotter, burning her skin.

Believe, she told herself. Come on, Benny, believe!

Tehke's face looked confused. He was unable to tell where her loyalties lay.

Suddenly he pulled his arm away from her and she felt her head cool.

'I sense no disloyalty,' he said, turning to James, 'but I sense no belief, either.'

'Master,' James said. 'Time is short.'

'Yes,' the god said, nodding. 'You're right, of course.' He smiled. 'You two,' he said, calling to a couple of more burly-looking worshippers. 'Grab hold of her. We need to make sure she doesn't do anything stupid.'

The men walked forward and took hold of Benny's arms. She smiled sweetly at them, despite the phrase 'oh no, not again' being prevalent in her thoughts.

The men shoved her down on to the floor.

'You understand, Bernice, don't you?' Tehke said. 'You can never be too careful with recent converts.'

Benny nodded and smiled. 'Of course, master.'

Tehke moved away from her and stepped back on to the stage.

'And now,' he announced, 'the ascension will begin!'

All around, the worshippers started chanting, and Benny caught one of the men holding her down eyeing her suspiciously. She quickly began to chant herself, hoping that her vague approximation of the words would be convincing enough.

Great, she thought. Now what?

Tehke raised an arm and a pillar of fire shot out from his fingers, lighting the room brightly before it plunged into darkness. The chanting stopped. But then a quiet rumbling noise began and the edges of the room were suddenly filled with fire. The yellow and orange light flickered violently across the room, casting demonic shadows over everyone's faces. The chanting became more intense, and Benny was sure she could hear Tehke laughing.

The room began to burn, and in moments slivers of metal started to fall from the ceiling. The room felt like a furnace, and the fires spread rapidly. Benny looked around frantically. Damn, she thought. Why did Tehke have to start the procedure so quickly?

She glanced at the laughing demon. Both his arms were now stretched up into the air.

A rumbling noise began, and the temple began to shake. More burning shards of metal fell from the ceiling and the air became thinner and thinner, replaced with noxious smoke.

A crack ripped open in the ceiling above Tehke, and the bright light of the daytime sky outside burst in. Spurred on by this fresh supply of oxygen, the fires suddenly became more violent, and Benny saw the first of the followers, the ones closest to the fires, start to burn.

The chanting was louder, more frantic, and more emotional than ever. Benny saw tears running down the cheeks of almost everyone in the room. Tears of joy, mixed with the sweat from the temperature of the room and the tense nature of their situation. This was it. The end of the world. Benny had failed. Tehke was about to win.

Benny saw Tehke begin to rise into the air. His form was fading slightly out of focus, as if shifting in and out of reality. His shape started to distort, changing from the fiery

humanoid he had been to a ghastly red demonic animal and back again. And all the time, Tehke was rising into the air, laughing. He was getting closer to leaving Dellah for ever. He was getting closer to victory. Tehke's ascension was at hand, and soon he would be free to inflict his domination on any planet he chose. One day, the entire galaxy would become a playground for the gods.

The concentration of belief in the room was so strong, so powerful, that Benny herself almost felt like joining in. But she knew she couldn't. She knew she had to be strong in the face of such a tremendous show of faith.

Benny stared into the eyes of the worshippers, who were clearly hanging on to every moment. She stared at their tears, and remembered. She remembered what the Oracle had told her, about the great war that might come to pass. She remembered that the chances of the war happening had faded, but had never gone away. She remembered realizing that whether the war occurred or not depended on her. And she remembered not believing a word of it. Until now.

This is it, she told herself. This is where you make the stand, Bernice. You already missed one chance for success, so this time there's no excuses. No Jason Kane to get in the way of the mission. Only the future to worry about now. Only making sure the war never happened - that the galaxy never knew the terror of living under the gods.

Benny stood up, let out a terrifying scream, then pulled with all her might, tearing her arms away from the grasp of the men who held her down. Either they were caught off guard by her sudden movement, or they were too caught up in their meditation and the spectacle of the burning room, but they seemed to do little to resist her escape attempt.

She looked across at Tehke, now over ten metres into the air, and ran as fast as she could to the stage. The worshippers were in her way but, kneeling and bowed low in their obeisance, they could be leapt over or used as stepping stones to get to the front of the room. Several of them grabbed at her ankles, but it seemed that the heat had sapped their energies.

Benny felt so tired. So ill. So determined. As she got to the stage she knelt down to look at the hole in the ground where the altar had been. The socket where the node would fit was now easily exposed. She reached into her pocket and took out the device. Before she could place it, she was pulled aside, She glanced up to see that her attacker was Harker.

‘Get back into position!’ he screamed.

Benny pulled back the fist that wasn’t holding the node and slammed it into Harker’s face. The force of the punch threw the priest backward. He crashed into a wooden shrine which, like almost everything else in the room, was burning. Harker screamed, and Benny realized that he would not trouble her for a few moments at least.

She looked down into the socket, smiled, and slammed the node into place. Nothing appeared to happen, and Benny turned to see that all around her the worshippers were collapsing. Many of them were burning, many of them were screaming, and many of them were silent, confident that their bravery would be rewarded in the afterlife.

Benny stared at the node, willing it to work. She fumbled at the device, checking she had made the connection properly, but everything was correctly in place.

The room was unbelievably hot, and Benny found she was barely able to breathe in the acrid smoke. Her head started to swim, and she realized that it would not be long before she lost consciousness. From somewhere to her left there was an explosion. Then another to her right. She heard the noise of rubble crashing on the ground.

She looked up at the hole in the ceiling, and saw one last glimpse of Tehke, just before he cleared the temple. He had achieved his ascension, and the power station was being destroyed by his fires. The Burning One had won.

Benny’s head was filled with a high-pitched ringing sound and she fell to the floor. She was crying too, now, and her tears stung her cheeks. The node had failed, and now she was going to die with the rest of the worshippers. She had tried her best, but the best hadn’t been good enough. The Doomsday Probe would be entering the atmosphere of Dellah

right about now, and soon no one in the sector would be left alive. Benny frantically tried to think of anything further she could do but the terror of the moment, of the screams, the burns and the smoke, meant that she was unable to think properly about anything. She curled herself up into a ball, closed her eyes and waited for the future to claim her.

As she lost consciousness, the node activated, humming with life.

Palma dreamt of reality. As time bubbled around her, matter reduced to a thin gas, her consciousness more solid than her body, she remembered those last moments, before the world collapsed.

For the second time in a day she had shot to kill. Neither time had she been given any reason to regret it. She had read in fiction of the torment of having to kill, but those authors hadn't lived on Dellah, had never suffered under the rule of living gods. A tyrant's death brought relief and hope, the answer to a long-held prayer.

Maande had jerked back as the bullet cut a path through her heart. The life escaped her in one last, gasping breath, her eyes glazing over before her body hit the ground.

Palma had spun around to see the features of Mor'yuchi dissolve, leaving a confused-looking trooper holding a sword over Clarence. To be on the safe side Palma had shot him too, and the trooper had reeled back, a plume of blood bursting from his shoulder. Maybe he'd live, maybe he wouldn't. But Clarence would survive, and that was all that mattered.

Palma had returned her gaze to the lifeless body of Maande, the vessel of the god Mor'yuchi. To her horror she had watched as a glowing mist poured from the dead woman's mouth and nose, coalescing into a wraithlike image before her. Palma had a brief glimpse of a bald, pale man in a black cloak, before the features of Mor'yuchi asserted themselves on the ghostly form.

Very clever, little girl, Mor'yuchi had said, his voice reaching into her mind. The spectral figure before her grinned demonically. *I shall have to take a new form. Watch as the angel becomes a god.*

‘No,’ Palma had screamed, and then the world around her had collapsed. Clarence had been pulling himself to his feet when Mor’yuchi’s essence rushed towards him, eager to claim the angel’s body for its own. Then Palma couldn’t see anything as the universe fell apart, reality twisting into a horrific, lurid blur.

As the planet Dellah made the jump between universes, the woman who had sent it on its long, sickening journey lay on the floor near the equipment that was making the jump. While almost everyone else on the planet was experiencing visions of the future and of the past, their senses scrambled by the transference process, Bernice Summerfield saw nothing.

Perhaps she had tired of such things.

Chris Cwej wasn’t a normal human. He had traversed universes, travelled in time, jumped dimensions and leapfrogged chronology. But even he was a little taken aback by the sensation of travelling to a whole new reality. The whole business was just so damn *bright*. He fumbled in his jacket pocket, and produced a pair of shades, put them on, and looked out into the wastes of endless nothingness.

‘Cool,’ he pronounced. It wasn’t the sort of thing even people like Cwej got to see every day.

The god Tehke, collapsing to the ground as his ascension fell apart, watched in horror as Dellah was ripped out of the universe that had formed it. Agony racked his body as his godlike powers withered and died, as he was slowly robbed of the gifts that the universe had bestowed upon him.

When he guessed where Dellah might end up he screamed in fury, terrified at the homecoming he would receive.

Like Chris, Clarence was not a being vulnerable to the effects of the transference. He watched the laws of nature suspend themselves momentarily, matter shifting through different forms, dreams becoming reality, then crumbling once more around him. But all he did was smile inwardly, glad to see

that Benny had completed her mission. He was not frightened by the change. Angels are not prone to existential worries.

The consciousness, the essence of the god Mor'yuchi, was slowing in midair, lunging eagerly towards Clarence. He clearly wished that the angel would become his next host. Clarence watched, rather detached, as Dellah entered the universe that would be its new home, and the passage of time and the laws of space asserted themselves. Different laws, but laws nonetheless.

Mor'yuchi's essence seemed to scream soundlessly, then twisted out of existence, reduced to nothing but smoke. Clearly the laws of this universe were unable to support such a being.

Clarence's smile broke out into a wide grin. Their information had been correct. The gods would be vulnerable. Clarence stretched his wings, and looked up into a whole new sky. He looked up at the dim star that Dellah now circled, at the dull red sun that had once burnt so brightly. It was now little more than an ember, and Clarence felt an inexplicable sadness. He had worried about crushing insects in his path, and had attended funerals for vast, artificial intelligences capable of processing a thousand times more thought and emotion than any living thing. But even Clarence could not comprehend the mourning required for a dying universe.

He looked around the deck of the dead god's vehicle. The whole thing had been a creation of Mor'yuchi's will. Without the presence of its creator, it was beginning to unravel. A slumbering guard fell through to the next level as the steel beneath him simply melted out of existence.

Clarence had to get Palma out of there before the place collapsed. He was in no danger: he could survive the rigours of space, drop through a planet's atmosphere and impact on the surface with barely a scratch. But human life was fragile, and to Clarence far more precious than the life of an artificial creature like himself. Sparing a single, brief glance at Maande's body as it rolled into a dip in the rippling,

crumbling deck, Clarence ran across to scoop Palma up in his arms. The railings were sagging like hot liquorice sticks, dark metal dripping, and Clarence kicked the remnants away with ease. Bracing his arms to cushion the girl held to his breast, he jumped, landing far below with a slight crunch.

It was cold in this new universe, the creeping death of the nearby star providing little warmth. Clarence laid Palma on the grass gently, and threw his outer cloak over her sleeping form. At rest she seemed far more peaceful, free of her waking agitation.

Clarence was certain Chris would find them soon. In the meantime he crossed his legs, and sat watching Palma sleep.

Benny was slapped awake by the icy splash of meltwater on her face, and she awoke coughing and bleary-eyed. While the fires had been deadened during transference, stale smoke hung in the air. Benny felt like her lungs had been dunked in bitumen. She rolled out of the way as another fat droplet of freezing water plummeted towards her, dripping through the hole in the ceiling.

‘Some party,’ she croaked, looking around the room. The idling was shattered, a different sky showing through a large gap, and the floor was riddled with cracks and chasms. The odd charred body lay spreadeagled around the place -Tehke worshippers lightly grilled, their brains scrambled by the Jump from one universe to another. Some were dead, some alive. Benny didn’t care enough to check - she had limited sympathy for people who were trying to sacrifice her less than an hour earlier.

Of Tehke, there was no sign.

Then her brain finally registered what she had seen through the gap in the ceiling, and she jerked her head up to look again. A different sky, a mass of lurid colours unfamiliar to her, a neon splash between the grey concrete of the broken roof. It was as if space itself was, in this universe, a different type of matter altogether. All-new universe, all-new rules. She hoped not to break any important scientific laws before she left. Please collect your litter as you leave this reality, and

dispose of it in the bins provided. Well, she thought as she pulled herself to her feet, at least they still had gravity, but she wasn't sure whether it was any stronger there, or whether she was just utterly knackered. Probably the former - she was far too young and healthy to get worn down so easily. Goddess, Benny thought, I'm even being sarcastic when I talk to myself.

Benny knelt down before the altar where the node had been locked into place. It glowed slightly as it sat there, humming contentedly to itself. For some reason Benny got the feeling it was *full*, as if it had somehow gorged itself on the energy from the power station. Certainly, it had drained off anything that might have caused Tehke's meltdown. The whole place was entirely dormant, every scrap of power channelled into the transference process. Benny felt like gently reassuring the node as she carefully detached it, connections sliding back into its body as she slid it into her pocket. She found herself making soothing noises, patting her pocket. Well, she thought, knowing the technology involved, it was bound to have some degree of artificial intelligence installed. And, as every good girl knew, it was never a good idea to piss off your ride home.

Then again, maybe the transference process had just driven her stark raving mad. This could be the universe where she was a lunatic. Or an evil double with a beard...

She shook such nonsensical thoughts out of her head. She had to find Jason, then locate some method of getting them both back to the rendezvous point. Then the node in her pocket would take her, Jason, Chris and Clarence all back in the *Revelation* to their own universe. Home in time for tea and bickies with Brax on the lawn.

Every journey had to begin with a single step, and her first step had to be to get out of the power station, preferably before the Tehke worshippers woke up and strung her up for interrupting their glorious sacrifice. She saw that a huge pile of rubble was as high as the crack in the ceiling. Getting out into the open air seemed like a start, and the

debris appeared climbable. Right, then. That would be the first step.

‘Come on, fatboy!’ barked Cwej, dragging Sevic’s gibbering form behind him. He was faintly aware that criticizing people for their weight was more than a little hypocritical, and that after his recent lifestyle Sevic was probably enjoying the harsh treatment Cwej meted out. But Cwej was too annoyed, too eager to get back to Clarence and Palma, to care. He had left his friends in the company of a deranged god, which hardly qualified as a compassionate approach to one’s peers. He told himself that retrieving Sevic had been too urgent a task, and that he hadn’t become irretrievably cynical and heartless in recent months. He almost convinced himself, but not quite. Certainly, dragging a man in the throes of a reality shift along like a sack of potatoes weighed against Cwej in the kindness stakes.

‘For fuck’s sake!’ shouted Cwej irately as Sevic collapsed again. He slapped the eye-rolling politico in annoyance, trying to wake him, but his brain was still fried. Cwej hoped this was only a temporary effect of the transference, otherwise Jason and Benny may be in a similar state. He wished Brax had warned them of such a side effect. He guessed Earth hadn’t tried bouncing a whole planet around like that before.

Leaving Sevic lying around on the cobbles of the courtyard - in the shadow of the statue Cwej had been working on earlier that day - he went in search of help. The people he found were either dead from the earlier battle with Mor’yuchi’s troops, or in a similar state to Sevic. He did find a trolley laden with metal sheets for the statue, and unceremoniously pushed its load on to the ground.

By the time Cwej had wheeled Sevic out through the palace walls, and to the top of the hill, the man had regained enough of his senses to stumble down to the bottom on his own. Cwej had to occasionally catch him when he slipped, and Sevic’s communication processes were reduced to wails and yelps, but that could as easily have been due to his

recent mistreatment as from the transference. Cwej hoped Braxiatel could knock some sense into the man once they got home, otherwise he would be little use in the Vremnyan negotiations.

The skimmer was still where Cwej had left it at the bottom of the hill, and he guided Sevic towards it.

Was it still night, or was this what daytime would be like in the new universe? Benny wasn't sure. All that she knew was that clearly human life could be sustained there, and that was the best she could have hoped for. It was cold outside, on the mountain top, as she looked out over the gaudily lit land, her old world under a new sky. Casmov had always been a place where it was hard to survive, and now it was even harder, under the faint glow of an ailing sun. But it was possible, thought Benny. And, if Braxiatel's predictions were right, then the gods would no longer be a threat. Life would go on, in some form or another.

As a chill wind cut through her clothes, the thought that the people of Dellah might have hope once more warmed her inside. She felt guilty about leaving them behind, not joining them in their fight for survival but running back to the safety of the universe the Dellahans would never get to see again.

Well, it was unfair but that was life. She had freed them from the gods, now the rest was up to them. She had her own life to lead, and it was time she got on with it. Her decision to stay with Jason, the feeling of her future mapped out before her - instead of the claustrophobia she usually felt in such circumstances - invigorated her. Down at the bottom of the mountain, where the boiling torrent became a normal, albeit unusually warm, river, Jason would have bounced out in his barrel. She had to find him, and get them both home to begin their life together. They had spent far too many years apart already.

She looked around her. The power station was in ruins, but a series of outbuildings remained, clinging to the mountain like limpets. A noise carried across the wind, and Benny was sure it was coming from a yellow plastic hut a short distance

away. Careful not to let the wind blow her over the edge, and to a sticky doom at the bottom of the mountain, she jogged across to it.

With Sevic unconscious again in the back, Cwej drove the skimmer like a maniac, tearing back along the trail left by Mor'yuchi's troop carrier. He hoped nothing had happened to them in his absence, and with his comlink apparently inactive there was no way for him to check on their status. He tried not to acknowledge the fact that maybe, just maybe, he might enjoy the thought that they needed rescuing. He was a professional, after all. The thrills of driving fast and getting into fights with villains had no appeal beyond the purely pragmatic for him.

He whooped as he tore round a corner with particular skill.

OK, maybe he got off on the whole thing just a little.

It was with horror that he saw the wreckage of the carrier ahead. He couldn't work out what had happened to it, so devastated were the remains of the vehicle. The towering monstrosity had been reduced to a vast pile of scrap, and Mor'yuchi followers were dazedly pulling themselves out of it. Cwej pulled up next to one and rolled down the window.

'Hey, fella,' he barked. 'Have you seen a dark-haired girl and a guy with wings anywhere around here?'

'God is dead!' screamed the follower, waving his arms at the carnage around him.

'Er, thanks,' said Cwej, rolling the window back up. Everyone was a philosopher these days.

It didn't take that long for him to find his friends. He stepped out of the skimmer and wandered over to Clarence, who was sitting next to the prone body of Palma.

'Is she...?' asked Cwej nervously. He could do without losing any friends today.

'Sleeping?' said Clarence, missing the point as usual. His voice was serene, parental even. 'Yes, she's sleeping. It's amazing. You can almost see the dreams she's having. I never dream, or even sleep.'

‘It’s the coffee,’ said Cwej. ‘You need to cut down. Look, can we get out of here? I’ve got Sevic and we really need to get back to meet Benny and Jason.’

‘Sure,’ said Clarence dreamily. ‘I’ll just wake her.’ He gently shook Palma’s shoulder, his other hand checking her brow for signs of fever.

‘Think we should take her back with us?’ asked Cwej. He didn’t really need to hear the answer.

‘We should at least offer her the chance,’ said Clarence. ‘She deserves something better than what this dead place can offer.’

Palma shook herself awake, and pulled herself up on her elbows. She looked at Clarence suspiciously.

‘Are you yourself?’ she asked bluntly.

‘Of course,’ the angel replied. ‘Mor’yuchi didn’t survive the journey here.’

Palma looked up at the alien sky, eyes widening in wonder. ‘Where is here?’

‘Another universe,’ said Clarence. ‘One where the gods can’t hurt anyone.’

‘Look,’ said Cwej impatiently. ‘The gods are finished. Do you want to stay here with the Dellahans or come back with us, because if me and Clarence don’t get back soon we’ll be stuck here for good.’

‘I’m coming with you,’ said Palma firmly. ‘There’s nothing here for me now.’

Benny rubbed snow away from the surface of the hut’s open door. The words MOUNTAIN RESCUE were emblazoned across the yellow plastic in thick black letters.

Inside were a couple of small, rather basic helicopters. Tinkering rather ineffectually with the engine of one of the vehicles was Tehke. The once-powerful god looked almost comical as he tried to get to grips with technology he had never needed, especially as his flames had gone out. Without the living fire covering his scarred body he looked a little pathetic, a victim rather than a torturer.

‘Trying to find a way out of here, are we?’ asked Benny, letting the door slam behind her.

Tehke reeled around to face her. The hatred in his eyes made her back off a couple of paces in shock.

‘You *bitch!*’ snapped the god. ‘I was so damn close, and you’ve ruined everything.’ He advanced on Benny trying to claw at her with his blistered hands. ‘My ascension, all ruined because of you. And, just to rub it in, you bring me here, home sweet home. Do you have any idea of the *shit* your interference has got me into? The backwoods freaks who run this place don’t take kindly to runaways, you know.’

‘My heart bleeds,’ said Benny defiantly, still keeping her distance. If nothing else, the smell of Tehke’s perpetually charred flesh was enough to turn her stomach.

‘Oh, you’ll be sorry soon enough,’ screamed Tehke, rapidly losing his temper. ‘I may not be the god I once was, but I can still -’

Tehke’s tirade was cut off by Benny’s fist slamming into his face, sending him reeling. He bumped into a big red button installed in the wall, and the ceiling of the hut began to slowly retract. The One God, the Burning One himself, collapsed to the ground in an untidy heap, knocked out stone-cold by one punch from an archaeologist.

Benny turned to the helicopters. She was sure piloting one couldn’t be too hard . . .

THE DYING UNIVERSE

Storm clouds were rumbling overhead as Cwej, Clarence and Palma walked over to the skimmer. They were greeted by an irate figure in a leather costume.

‘All this searching was for *him?*’ said Palma in disgusted disbelief.

‘I’m afraid so,’ said Cwej. ‘So, you’re awake then?’

‘What the hell is going on here?’ moaned Sevic. ‘Who are you people?’

‘Look,’ said Cwej, trying to use his most schoolteacherly tones. ‘You’ve been trapped in that palace for ages. We’re taking you somewhere where you can be safe.’ His patience snapped like overstretched elastic. ‘So shut the fuck up and do as you’re told.’

Sevic glared at Cwej darkly. ‘Be careful who you speak to in such insolent tones.’

‘You don’t scare me, leather boy,’ said Cwej. ‘And you’re beginning to piss me off. Will you do the honours, Clarence?’

The angel nodded, turned around, then flipped his torso round with such speed that his wings knocked into Sevic’s multiple chins, sending him flying to the ground.

Clarence knelt down to check Sevic’s condition. ‘He seems a bit concussed, but at least he shouldn’t be as obnoxious for a while.’

‘Now let’s have your comlink,’ Cwej said to Clarence. The angel passed it over to him, and Cwej flicked it on, hoping to catch up with Benny at last. But it was dead. ‘Damn. These things just don’t work out here. Clarence, I’ll take fatboy and Palma back in the skimmer. You fly ahead and check how the others are doing.’

'OK,' agreed Clarence, who leapt up into the air, his wings heating violently, before crashing straight down on to the ground. As he landed, Clarence lost his balance. He tripped over, dropped, almost hitting Palma, and ended up in a twisted heap on the floor.

'Er, Clarence?' said Cwej. 'Are you OK?'

Clarence shook his head. 'I don't understand...'

He took a little run up then leapt into the air. Once more he fell to the floor. 'I can't fly,' he said with toneless incomprehension. 'I really can't fly.'

'Yeah,' said Cwej, 'I can see that.' He stared up into the sky. 'It must be something about this universe. Remember what Brax said about the gods' powers not working here? Well, that ain't all that don't work here. First the comlinks, now your flight. What else is going to break down?'

Clarence nodded, and prodded Cwej in the chest. 'Are you sure you're all fine, my friend?'

'What do you... oh, hang on.' Cwej knelt down and placed a hand on Sevic's forehead. Where usually Cwej would have felt the tingle of a thousand different thoughts and emotions buzzing around the man's brain, he now felt nothing. Sevic was murmuring quietly, still slightly dozy. For some reason, his mind just appeared to Cwej to be blank.

Cwej shook his head. 'Nothing. My telepathic sensitivity's gone completely dead.' Cwej thought back a lifetime ago, back to the days before he'd ever met the time travellers. 'I feel like I used to in the past. I feel so... weak.'

Clarence smiled and put a hand on Cwej's shoulder. 'You'll be fine,' he said. 'As soon as we get back to our universe we'll be back to normal, I'm sure.'

Cwej nodded. 'Yeah.' He looked down at Sevic, who was standing up, scowling. 'Besides, we've got better things to worry about.' He looked up at the stormridden sky, magenta clouds spiralling at implausible speeds. A real-life time-lapse movie. 'I don't like the look of this at all. Everybody in the skimmer.'

Sevic started to protest, but caved in when Clarence flexed his wings in a menacing fashion.

‘How can this thing get us there fast enough?’ Clarence asked. ‘It just looks like an ordinary skimmer to me.’

Cwej looked back at the angel and grinned. ‘Hey, this is me you’re talking to. A little pedal to the metal, and we’ll be there in no time. Besides, Mor’yuchi knew to buy the best. This baby makes no concessions to logic, safety or sensible road use.’

He pushed a few keys on the control panel and used a trick his former employers had taught him to disable the speed limiter. He smacked the control panel with his fist, and the skimmer juddered into life, whirring in a menacingly aggressive manner.

‘There,’ he said smugly, ‘told you we’d be fine.’

Sevic sighed. ‘Where are we going again?’

‘Home,’ Cwej told him. He glanced down at the dead com-link. ‘At least, we are if Benny’s still alive.’

On this upbeat thought, Cwej hit the ignition and the skimmer sped off across the countryside. They had a date with the future, and he didn’t want to be late.

Darkness. Noisy, crashing, painful darkness. Pain. Numbness. Tiredness. Darkness.

Jason wondered how long he had been on this hellish roller coaster. His head was filled with hallucinations and strange colours, and his body felt as if it had been run over by a bus. He remembered the fight with Tehke’s minions. He remembered Benny pulling him out of the scuffle, and he remembered telling Benny he loved her.

After that, he remembered crawling inside a barrel and being pushed into a river with a vicious downstream current.

Not the most everyday of occurrences, but hey, it was good life experience.

The barrel was tough enough to survive the battering the river bed gave it as it bounced downstream. Unfortunately, the barrel’s contents weren’t. Given that Jason was so badly injured that he kept falling unconscious, woken only by the

banging and shaking as the barrel travelled down the river, he did not appreciate the extra bruises the trip would furnish him with.

The crashing segued into a calm rocking, and Jason hoped that this meant he was clear of the more hazardous areas of the river. He could hear nothing but the excited rushing of the water outside. He felt slightly nauseous but was not sure whether this was due to the vibrations making him travel sick or his injuries from the fight.

Suddenly there was another bang, followed by a drawn-out creaking noise. And then the vibration stopped. Everything was still and the noise of the water was replaced by the noise of people talking in the distance.

‘Hello?’ Jason murmured. ‘Anyone out there?’

A slow scratching noise was suddenly followed by a blinding burst of light filling the barrel. Jason realized that the lid had been removed, and took a deep breath of the fresh air outside. He looked up through blood-caked eyes and saw two faces staring at him expectantly.

‘Are you all right, Mr Kane?’ asked one of the villagers.

‘What does it look like?’ Jason sighed. ‘Just get me out of this thing, will you?’

The villagers tipped the barrel over and extracted Jason’s crumpled and bashed-up body from it. Jason winced several times as he tried to move. He had forgotten how disabling his wounds were.

‘Ow,’ cringed one of the villagers, ‘that looks painful. Let me get the first-aid kit for you.’

The man reached down and unzipped a rucksack that was lying on the ground.

‘I’m sure I packed some pretty good bandages,’ he said. ‘Ah, yes, here we are.’ He pulled out a long white box and clicked it open. ‘Don’t look so worried, Mr Kane. I’m fully trained. Now, lie on your front. You’ve got a nasty puncture wound in your back. Let me see if I can patch it up.’

As the villager got to work with swabs and bandages, Jason propped his head on his hands and stared out at the snow and noticed that it seemed to have gained a shade of

purple. He glanced up at the sky and realized that the reds and purples he thought were there due to a black eye obscuring his vision were actually part of the heavens. There was only one explanation for this: Benny had succeeded. They were in the dying universe. He let out a relieved breath of air and felt a wave of tension disappear from his body. At least something had gone right today. He suddenly felt guilty for feeling that way. What if Benny had been injured in the process? What if she was ... No, he told himself, stop thinking like that. Benny can take care of herself.

‘Give me a tissue,’ he said to the villager. The man did so, and Jason used it to wipe the scum away from his eyes and face. That was better.

He took another look at the sky to see if he could make out any new planets. The bright-blue sky Dellah had enjoyed before was now a rich mixture of colours which swirled around each other as if conducting some form of tribal mating ritual. The sky was a giant lava lamp, and Jason found it difficult to pull his eyes away from such a spectacular sight. Where previously a bright sun had dazzled his eyes, a small red candle flame of a star flickered in the sky, burning furiously, trying to provide as much heat as it could manage, but failing to create much of an impression in a sky that seemed to light itself naturally without the aid of sunlight.

Jason felt a jab in his back and realized that the villager had applied a gel-heal block over the wound.

The villager noticed Jason’s concerned look, and smiled at him gently. ‘You’ll be fine,’ he reassured. ‘Apart from one cut which I’ve nicely sealed, there’s nothing more than some severe bruising here. I’ve checked you over with a pocket scanner and there’s no internal bleeding. You’ll be back to normal in a few hours, I’m sure.’

At that moment the sky darkened briefly, then lightened again. Jason glanced up to see what had caused the darkness, but could see nothing.

The sky darkened again, just as Jason looked down. Seeing that in the distance everything stayed lit up, Jason realized

that the shadow that engulfed the area was a local phenomenon.

He reached over to the villager and tapped him on the shoulder. 'Did you see

'You'll be fine,' the villager reassured him. 'Apart from one cut which I've nicely sealed, there's nothing more than some severe bruising here. I've checked you over with a pocket scanner and there's no internal bleeding. You'll be back to normal in a few hours, I'm sure.'

OK, thought Jason. Whatever you say. Could it be that the transference to this universe turned people senile? Jason hoped he'd remembered to turn the gas off.

The villager moved away and Jason stood up. He shivered as a jab of cold blasted through his body.

'Ow,' he said, feeling the wound in his back. The gel-heal block had almost dissolved, but he could feel that the wound was still open.

He reached up one of his hands and clasped his forehead.

'What the hell's going on?' he mumbled, praying that his mind had not been more scrambled by the barrel journey than he had originally thought.

And then something very strange happened.

'*Who are you?*' Jason's brain screamed.

'Who are you?' the mountains appeared to rumble.

'Who are you?' hissed a tall man who had suddenly appeared next to Jason. 'And, more importantly, what are you doing materializing a planet in our home space?'

The man was completely hairless, with skin that was so thin it was almost transparent. He was wrapped in a high-collared tunic and a long black cloak that appeared to be alive, rippling of its own accord.

'What's going on?' Jason asked the man. 'What's happening?'

'I ask again, who are you?'

'Is this one of those deep and philosophical questions to which the answer isn't Jason Kane but some deep secret within my soul that affects my destiny or something?'

The man released a powerful laugh and Jason was sure the ground shook slightly in time with it. Perhaps it was a coincidence. Perhaps this was another of the tremors this area seemed so susceptible to. Or perhaps not.

‘Do not be so ridiculous,’ the man said. ‘We would never be that pretentious. Jason Kane is a fine answer. Now, answer the other part of the question.’

‘Erm, it’s a bit complicated.’

‘This is our space,’ said the man, ‘not yours.’

Well that explained a lot. Jason guessed that this must be one of the natives to this universe that Braxiatel had warned them about. Of course, that explained the strange time fluctuations - the gel-block dissolving, the villager’s amnesia - these beings were able to blur the boundaries of time and thought, moulding either to their will. In short, they were beings of almost unlimited power.

‘We’re from another galaxy,’ Jason said eventually. ‘We’ve brought the planet here as a gift to you.’ Jason’s heart froze as he said this, and he prayed that such a sweeping statement as that, not to mention one that was a complete lie, would be easy to get out of once he was in a slightly better bargaining position. As it stood, these beings could very well destroy Dellah, and Jason realized that even the stupidest of lies was excusable if it would make these creatures leave the planet alone.

Jason put on a big grin, in the hope that the creature would be charmed by a cheesy smile, but the man’s manner didn’t change at all from the emotionless stare that had been on his face since his arrival.

‘You are wounded,’ said the man.

Jason nodded. ‘Getting the planet here... well, it wasn’t exactly easy.’

The man raised the palm of his hand towards Jason and drew a star-shaped pattern in the air with his index finger.

A stab of pain sliced through Jason’s body. He screamed as his eyes burnt in a bright sea of electric-blue fire. It was a burst of monumental power filling his soul. A burst of hot fusion, energizing his spirit.

And then everything was back to normal. Jason sat up, then looked down on his wounds. All signs of injury had disappeared. He took a deep breath and realized that he felt great. The bruises were gone, his headache had stopped. He fingered the stab wound in his back. Gone. He felt like he had just woken up from a long, healing sleep.

‘Well, this is interesting,’ said the man, his tone of voice varying for once, making him almost sound human. ‘There is more to you than meets the eye, Jason Kane.’

Jason was about to ask the man for some answers, but then his vision disappeared. He could see nothing. He could hear nothing. He was, not for the first time that day, embraced by total darkness. After that, the burning began.

It had been barely moments after the helicopter took off, Benny gripping the joystick for dear life, that the creatures had arrived. While desperately concentrating on not crashing back into the mountain, she tried to watch their descent out of the corner of her vision. Brilliant bright violet balls of energy were slowly drifting down from the sky, plasma snowflakes, drifting down like giant soap bubbles. Lightning bolts zapped around the edges of the bubbles, and mini whirlwinds raged as if the bubbles were distorting the weather. Not good conditions for one’s first flight.

She managed to get the ‘copter level, hovering slightly above the Mountain Rescue hut, giving her a chance to take a proper look at the bubbles, and try to spot a way of navigating around them. Inside the bubbles, Benny was sure she could make out humanoid shapes. Were these the natives of the dying universe they had been warned about? If they were as powerful as Braxiatel had claimed, then going up to them and asking would not be a good way to find out. She looked down to see the reddened figure of Tehke, running at inhuman speed across the snowy mountain top. With one leap he disappeared back into the power station. If Tehke didn’t want to meet these creatures, Benny needed to get away fast.

The bubbles hovered around one side of the mountain, and Benny began to steer the helicopter away from them, hoping they would not see her. She could do without them blasting her out of the sky just yet. Before the bubbles touched the peak, they appeared to shoot off at an angle, ignoring her completely. She watched as, one by one, the bubbles moved off in an orderly direction. A direction that led right into the power station. Right to where Tehke had run.

Benny guessed that, as usual, things were about to get even nastier. While the creatures were in the power station, she took the opportunity to recklessly pilot the helicopter straight past it. With a gasp she let the 'copter plummet down the side of the mountain, away from Casmov, its temple and its horrors. The place had served its purpose, and Tehke was no concern of hers any more. Let these creatures sort him out. She had to find Jason and get to the rendezvous point. She didn't want to stay in this universe any longer than was absolutely necessary.

James had hidden in the observation lounge when the ascension had started to go so horribly, terribly wrong. He jumped in shock when the Burning One crashed through the door, omnipotent calm shattered, breath ragged and wheezing. The god looked broken - *mortal*. James wondered what was going on, but couldn't even attempt an explanation. There was no holy book to consult over this one.

'Master?' said James. 'Are you ill?'

The Burning One stared out of the observation window, as if looking for something to come down from the sky. Seemingly satisfied he was in no immediate danger, he turned and looked James in the eyes. 'You don't understand anything!' Tehke shouted.

James gasped as he realized that a bright white light was trawling down the god's face. Was he... crying?

'I know,' James said hurriedly, trying not to enrage the god. 'He didn't want to be punished, or feel Tehke's fury. I'm sorry. But we can start the sacrifice again, can't we? We can continue.'

Tehke laughed, a guttural, unpleasant sound. 'You just don't get it. I was going to be the ruler of the universe. I was going to be the most powerful being your universe had ever known. I wouldn't just be *a* god, I would be *the* god.'

James nodded. 'The ascension, I know.'

'But now... now I have nothing.' Tehke looked distraught, and James found that his own eyes were welling up. It felt uncomfortable to see his god so helpless.

'Why are you still here, James?' Tehke asked.

James was puzzled by this statement. 'Because you're my master, of course.'

Tehke smiled ironically and shook his head. 'James, James, James. Let me tell you a story. Long ago, I first arrived in your universe, and I was amazed by the wonders I saw. Sure, there was pain, suffering and war, but there was also such excitement, such thrills. It was amazing. I travelled across the galaxy, becoming more and more besotted with your universe, becoming more and more desperate to have it for my own. Then, I was summoned back to fight a war. A war that led to my imprisonment for a millennium. In short, I was trapped. I knew my dream would have to wait.'

'And your dream... was the ascension?'

'Yeah,' sighed Tehke. 'An ascension that can never happen now. We're back in a place I left long ago, a place I hoped we'd never see again. My homeland.'

'Is there anything I can do, master?' James asked desperately.

Tehke shook his head. 'Just go. Get out of here. Find a transport to another planet or something, I don't care. You'll love it here, peace, beauty, flowers, trees and hippie rubbish everywhere.'

James paused, unsure quite what to say. 'Can't you come with me, master?'

Tehke laughed. 'No, I have to stay here and meet the folks back home. Wherever I go, they'll find me. I've destroyed any chance my people had of living on after the death of our universe, so I doubt they'll give me a welcome-home party.'

Suddenly the flames around Tehke's body disappeared in what was quite literally a puff of smoke. His face seemed to shift and melt, and in moments Tehke's burning form had been replaced by a tall, bald man in a black cloak.

'This is my true form, James. I've gone against it for too long. 'S funny, I like Tehke. He was a cool image. The teachings went on about justice. I didn't care for any of it, but it kept you guys faithful. Now, I'm going to have to face the music for my actions.'

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. 'And now, justice will be my undoing.'

James was beginning to understand this. 'So here you're not a god, is that right?'

Tehke nodded. 'Here, I'm just a Lord.'

It was true. Tehke really wasn't as universally powerful as he had seemed. James felt terrible for what he had done. He had freed Jason Kane, and as a result Tehke's plan was ruined. But if Tehke wasn't really all-powerful, if this wasn't really Tehke even, then the betrayal was just. James was relieved to feel that he had done the right thing, but months of devotion to the Burning One meant that guilt still filled his soul.

'You are the one who has destroyed all hope,' a booming voice said suddenly out of nowhere.

James turned to see that another man, looking similar to the new Tehke but slightly stouter, had appeared in the corner of the room.

'You are the one who has killed the others of your party,' the man continued. 'You are the one who has refused to follow the Code of Intervention.'

Tehke nodded, and a big resigned grin flashed across his face. He held out his hands as if to surrender. 'OK,' he said. 'You got me.'

Suddenly the room filled with energy, fire and electricity. James saw Tehke disappear from view. Had he been erased from existence, or simply transported somewhere else?

James felt his skin burn as Tehke's people consumed the room with fire. The last thought James had before he died was that he had been wrong. His faith had been misguided, and now he would never find paradise.

It took Benny a while, but she finally managed to find the river at the bottom of Mount Casmov. Following it was another matter: there were many, many easier things in the world than trying to keep track of a thin, winding river nearly twenty metres below. In a snowstorm. While trying to pilot a helicopter. It felt like she needed at least two extra heads to do the job properly. Nevertheless, she eventually managed to follow the river with some degree of competency, and located a couple of fur-clad figures wandering around in the snow. They looked up to her in anticipation as she landed the helicopter, which skidded slightly on the snow as it settled.

As she dropped out of the 'copter, she took a closer look at the two men, standing vacantly there. They were, as she suspected, the two villagers who had been left behind when Benny and her team had entered the mountain. Benny realized with a small pang of self-disgust that she had never even bothered to find out their names. Well, if nothing else, she had been focused on the mission; she certainly hadn't bothered with good manners.

'Hello you and, er, you!' she cried cheerily, waving to the two men. 'How are things?'

'Professor Summerfield,' said one. 'We're so sorry.'

'What?' she demanded. 'What's happened?' Nightmarish visions swept through her mind. Perhaps she hadn't checked the barrel well enough for leaks, and Jason had been boiled to death. Perhaps it had sunk. Perhaps he had drowned.

'Jason,' said the second villager. 'They took him.'

'Who took him?' asked Benny, but she knew the answer even before she was told.

'The aliens,' said the first villager. 'They came down in their globes, just after we'd pulled your friend out of the barrel. They froze us in time, and before we could do anything to stop them they took him.'

‘Where did they go?’ she demanded.

The two villagers shrugged. ‘Nowhere. They just disappeared.’

‘Oh, hell,’ said Benny, looking back up the mountain, if that was the focus of the aliens’ attention, would that be where they had taken Jason? She felt like going back up there, trying to find out. But the node weighed heavily in her pocket, reminding her that it was her responsibility to rejoin Chris and Clarence so that they could get home. And, if they ‘had completed their mission, then a whole world would need Sevic returned. But, then again, if Jason was back in the power station -

That line of thought was cut off as the power station exploded, flaming rubble rolling down the mountainside. The alien spheres emerged from the firestorm, flying over the heads of Benny and the villagers.

Another decision made for her. The aliens were travelling in the same direction as she was. It looked like there was only one way to go.

FRACTAL FUTURES

The *Revelation's* autopilot had set the ship down by the side of a rock face in the middle of a desert seventy miles from Tashwari. Chris had wired up a quick holoface plug-in to activate as soon as the ship had landed, meaning that from the outside the *Revelation* appeared to be an abandoned fort. Although the fort did not stand out in any way, and only those with a detailed knowledge of the region would have any idea that it had not been there for decades, it was just unusual enough in design that it was easy for everyone to find once they had completed their missions.

Thanks to the stolen helicopter, it had taken Benny only forty minutes to reach the *Revelation*. She had made good time, but she was desperately afraid that the inhabitants of this universe would have already found the shuttle. Luckily, the old fort was deserted, a stone ruin of a once great military outpost. At least that was how it appeared.

Benny landed the helicopter near the entrance to the fort, skids grinding as they touched the hard ground. She stopped the engine and hopped out, running over to the fort's entrance and placing her palm against the wall. The wall shimmered, and the hologram disengaged, revealing the sleek hull of the *Revelation*.

The ship's advanced technology scanned her and recognized who she was, and a hatch hissed open, a burst of mist flooding out from within.

Benny marched inside and closed the hatch behind her.

'Jason?' she called. 'Jason, are you here?' There was no answer.

She darted around the ship, checking everywhere from Jason's quarters to the cargo bay, but he was nowhere to be

seen. She had to face the fact that Jason had been captured by the aliens, just as the villager had claimed. She had to find him, and that meant confronting the aliens face to face.

She ran into the cockpit, planted herself in the pilot's seat and flicked the viewscreen on. An electronic whirr followed as the blast doors drifted apart, revealing the desert outside.

'Scanner on,' she said to the ship's computer as she flicked on the autopilot. 'Is there any sign of Jason Kane, Clarence or Chris Cwej in the area?'

A monitor screen in the left armrest of the seat started to beep and Benny glanced down to read the information it was displaying. A skimmer carrying beings matching the description of Chris and Clarence was near, but there was no sign of Jason. Where are you? she wondered.

She reached into her trouser pocket and pulled out the transference node. She weighed it in her hands and smiled. A job well done, even if she said so herself. The node was humming contentedly, a dim glow emanating from between the metal crosshatch lines that covered the device. Whatever this technology was, it was clearly beyond anything humanity was previously capable of. She wondered if humans would ever reach the levels of power the higher races seemed to possess. She wondered if her race would ever be the gods.

Benny flicked open a control hatch underneath the main control panel and plugged the node in. A wave of blue light flashed through the cockpit as the device was engaged. The node was safely in place. All she had to do now was flick a power switch on, and the node would activate, sending the *Revelation* back to a universe now free from the presence of the gods. But first she had to rescue her friends.

'I don't know what came over me,' Sevic was saying, as he pulled on a pair of New Moral Army overalls that he found in the back of the skimmer. 'One moment I was in a meeting with the Sultan, the next... I remember what I did, I just can't remember why I did it.'

Cwej sighed. 'Yeah, well don't worry about it.' He really had no interest in listening to the man's whining. 'You're safe

now. Just lie low and stick with us. We'll get you back to Vremnya in no time.'

'I should bloody well hope so,' Sevic tutted. 'I've had enough of this place.'

Cwej couldn't help feeling uneasy about helping this guy. This was the man who was at least partially responsible for inciting the wars that had claimed thousands of lives on Vremnya, yet they were saving his life. Where was the justice in that?

'You know,' Sevic said, prodding Clarence in the chest, 'I could use a chap like you on my team. It would show the boys that God really was on the side of our people!'

'Would you shut up?' Cwej shouted. He'd had quite enough religion for one lifetime. This was going to be a long journey.

As they got closer to the *Revelation*, the fractal sky appeared to be patterned with round blotches. Dark shadows covered the planet's surface, and Cwej soon realized that the blotches weren't part of the sky, but were actually spheres of energy.

Cwej slowed the skimmer to a halt and watched as the spheres drifted to the ground. One by one, the energy fields around the spheres dissipated to reveal that they were transporting what looked like people, or at the very least bipeds. He squinted, but couldn't make out any more detail.

'What are they?' Clarence asked.

'I'm not sure,' said Cwej. 'Although they look familiar.'

One by one, the creatures neared the skimmer.

'I think we'd better get out of here,' said Sevic, reaching over to the driver's controls.

'No!' snapped Cwej, slapping him on the hand. 'Wait a minute.' There was something about the appearance of the aliens. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, trying to summon a long-forgotten memory from deep within his mind. 'Let me talk to them,' he told the others. 'They might be friendly.'

Cwej leapt out of the skimmer and ran up to one of the aliens.

‘We mean no harm,’ he said, trying not to sound ironic. ‘We come in peace.’

The alien looked at him with curiosity. ‘You,’ he said, ‘your genetic profile is unusual. You are not from here.’

Cwej shook his head. ‘It’s a long story. We’re leaving as soon as we can.’

‘I know,’ said the alien. ‘But first, I wanted to talk to you. I want to find out exactly who you are... what you’re doing here.’

The alien raised his hand and a tube of space between him and Cwej appeared to distort, rippling in a colourful wind that wasn’t there.

‘What are you doing?’ Cwej asked. ‘What’s going -’

He felt the alien reach into his mind and pull out things he never knew were there. Things that didn’t belong. And then he remembered everything clearly again, and it all fell into place. It was long ago in Cwej’s life, back when... back when he was innocent. He remembered things the way they happened, not the way his employers wanted him to.

‘It’s clear now,’ he mumbled. ‘I remember how things were. I remember who Chris Cwej really was. Who I really am.’

And he remembered an ice planet. One of the coldest in the galaxy that was capable of supporting human life. He remembered an ancient time machine, and an ancient traveller. And he remembered ghosts. Ghosts from another universe...

‘The dying universe!’ Chris exclaimed. ‘The dying universe we’re in now, and the one we eliminated from existence. The one the fusion bombs destroyed. It’s this one, isn’t it?’

Chris punched the air as he realized exactly what was going on. Clarence ran up to Chris and put his arm around him, pulling him round as if to have a quiet word. ‘What’s going on, Chris?’ the angel asked. ‘Who are they?’

Chris smiled. ‘They’re the natives of this place, my angelic friend. They’re people who interfere in time in order to maintain their despotic Utopia. They’re called the Ferutu. And they’re dying.’ Clarence looked at him, bemused. ‘Look,

it's a long story. Suffice to say that this universe isn't dying because it's near the end of its life: it's dying because it's been erased from existence. I know, 'cos I was there. We thought this place was gone for ever, but somehow it still exists.' He turned to the Ferutu. 'How did you...?'

The Ferutu smiled. 'Remember, we are the Lords of Time. We are the most powerful beings in the... in our universe. We were aware that we should never have been created, aware that one moment we existed, the next we were a freak time anomaly. The nature of our power meant that we were able to intercept the inevitable before it took place. We have found ways to fight it for years, have given our universe a stay of execution. But time is catching up with us, and while our scientists still toil to find ways to shift time, to prevent us being erased, most of us have come to terms with our impending destruction.'

'But not all of you?' said Chris.

'No,' the Ferutu continued. 'A rebellious faction of our people decided to try their hand at revenge. They decided that they would flee to another universe to escape their destruction. They decided that, since it was your universe that had caused their destruction, it would be your universe that they would flee to.'

'And they're the gods?' Chris wondered.

The Ferutu nodded. 'That's what you call them, yes.'

But why?' Chris asked. 'Why didn't they just turn around and take over the universe? Why all the god stuff?'

'It's all logistics,' said the Ferutu. 'Do you know how much energy it takes to shift to another universe? Not only did the rebels knock a decade off the time we have before we're destroyed, they also put themselves at the mercy of time. The technology was weak, and we know now that the journey to your universe resulted in the deaths of most of the rebels. Those that survived the trip were so wounded that some of them could barely exist on anything other than a mental level. The moment they arrived in your universe, they were recognized for what they were and imprisoned. But we're survivors. The rebels soon learnt that in your universe

there were no restrictions. Those without physical bodies found they could live in between the cells of an individual's mind. The immortality they enjoyed in your universe ensured that they could take on whatever shape or form they wished, and even death was not to be feared. After a millennium's imprisonment, they were finally able to walk again, and, slowly but surely, they began to build up their power. They knew they would not survive the trip home, so they decided on the next best thing.'

'Bring home to them,' said Chris. 'They wanted to take over our universe and re-form it into one identical to this.'

The Ferutu nodded. 'And, although their powers were weak, they knew that as soon as they had the faith and trust of that universe, as we do from the people of this one, they would be able to regain their full power and begin the process that would recreate this place long after its death.'

'So what's with all the fighting?' said Clarence. 'Why the discord among the gods?'

'Because the one you called Tehke got to like your universe. He liked the fact that you had wars, suffering and poverty. He also liked the power he enjoyed. So he decided to kill off his brothers, knowing that they were planning to create a universe where he would be one of many rather than the ruler of many. The rest of the rebels tried to stop him, but then, somewhat unexpectedly, you interfered.'

'But we stopped him for you. We brought him back.'

The Ferutu nodded. 'He will face justice. And, speaking of justice, it's been a pleasure talking to you, but I came here for a reason. You've brought this planet into our already resource-depleted universe and you've denied the rebels who did make it to your universe the chance to survive. In other words, you should be punished. You will be destroyed. You took our universe from us, now we will take your lives in return.'

The Ferutu raised his palm and sparks of electricity began to gather around it. 'The people you have brought here will not be harmed, but someone has to pay the price for the space displacement and extra resources this planet will cost

us. I have seen in your mind that there were four of you here who were privy to what was going on, and you four will be punished so that the others might live.'

The ground around Chris began to rumble and a ball of copper-tinged energy shot from the Ferutu's wrist. Chris ducked out of the way just in time and narrowly avoided having his head singed. 'Otherwise', continued the Ferutu, almost mournfully, 'there will be no justice.'

'Come on,' Chris screamed at Clarence as he started to make a run for the skimmer. He leapt inside just as another electricity ball shot past his head.

'What's going on?' Palma asked.

Chris slammed the thrust control on and the skimmer lurched into action, speeding away from the Ferutu's attack. Chris looked ahead and was glad of the friendly sight of the *Revelation* on the horizon. They couldn't be more than a few minutes away from it.

'It's the gods,' said Clarence. 'Or, more precisely, the gods' masters. They've decided that Chris and myself are not worthy.'

'Look,' shouted Sevic, 'I want no part of this. Let me go!'

'Will you shut up!' shouted Palma. 'Can't you see they're trying to help.' Sevic's only reply was to mumble something incoherent under his breath, like a small child.

Chris glanced at the rear-view mirrors. 'Damn,' he said. 'They're gaining on us.'

There were now seven Ferutu chasing after the skimmer, and in their hovering energy spheres they seemed to be moving as quickly as the vehicle. All around bolts of energy flashed, and what little plant life there was in the desert was instantly frazzled.

'Come on!' Chris urged the skimmer, as the *Revelation* neared. 'Just a few more moments.'

Suddenly there was a bang and the world started to tumble. The sensation Chris felt was like being on a roller coaster, and he found himself crashing to the ground, a clump of earth flying into his mouth. He spat it out and looked up to see what was going on.

The skimmer had been flipped over by the Ferutu's energy bolts, and was lying on the ground, a flaming wreck pouring out smoke. Chris looked around for the others, and saw that they had all landed several metres apart from each other. Clarence looked fine, while Palma and Sevic seemed slightly shell-shocked. The girl was covering one eye with her hand, while a thick gash wound down the side of Sevic's face.

Chris hoisted himself up, thankful everyone was alive. Clarence was helping Palma up, so Chris grabbed Sevic's arm and levered him out of the shattered vehicle. The fat man was fingering the wound in his face.

Chris slapped him to attention. 'We'll get that looked at later; we've got other worries right now.'

'Chris!' Clarence shouted, pointing to the rapidly nearing Ferutu energy spheres.

'You get these two to the shuttle,' Chris replied. 'I'll hold them off.'

Clarence nodded and grabbed hold of Sevic's arm. 'Come, on, you,' he said. Clarence pulled himself into the air, momentarily forgetting his lack of power, then sheepishly started to run towards the *Revelation* instead, hand in hand with Palma.

Chris reached to his side and pulled out his gun. He had forgotten about it until then, believing it to be useless against the Ferutu, but things were so desperate by this point that it couldn't hurt to try.

He fired several blasts at the Ferutu, and hit one of them right on target. The Ferutu's travel sphere momentarily stopped in its tracks, the substance of the globe appearing to break up. It halted for a short second before re-forming, the Ferutu continuing his relentless pursuit. The weapon could delay the Ferutu's attack, but it couldn't stop it.

Chris used the wreckage of the skimmer as cover, and ducked out of the range of the Ferutu weaponry.

Suddenly he was knocked into the air as a small shrub beneath his feet began to grow rapidly. He saw the look of pleasure on one of the Ferutu's faces, and guessed that this must be an example of their time-over-matter powers. The

plant grew up until it was a large tree, and Chris fell out of its branches, crashing to the ground with a thud.

Chris was about to surrender, to attempt a peaceful bargain, when a precise burst of red energy shot into the chest of one of the Ferutu, sending him crashing to the ground. Chris turned to see that the *Revelation's* weapon systems had started firing on the Ferutu. Clarence and the two humans were still trying to get to the ship, so it could mean only one thing. Benny and Jason were already there. Chris grinned. Maybe today wouldn't be so bad after all.

'We're almost there,' said Clarence, as he dragged the disgruntled Sevic towards the *Revelation*.

'I hope you people have good lawyers,' Sevic moaned. Palma slapped the back of his head in irritation.

Clarence and Sevic were thrown to the ground as a burst of powerful static filled the air. Clarence looked at Sevic to make sure he wasn't injured. He didn't want to lose the old bastard now. Although he was largely unscathed, Sevic's previously brown hair was now white, and his face was filled with wrinkles. The cut in his face had settled into an old, rough scar. The man had aged twenty years in ten seconds. It was like nothing Clarence had ever seen.

'Get to the ship!' Clarence shouted. 'Now!'

Sevic nodded and hurried towards the ship, Palma close behind. Luckily the door was open, allowing Sevic to dive straight in. He hoped Benny would be able to sort him out.

There was a loud, eardrum-breaking whooshing noise as a Ferutu appeared in front of Sevic. 'Oh no you don't,' he said. 'None of you are going anywhere.'

The Ferutu fired a steady stream of what could only be described as lightning at Sevic, and the man writhed in agony, frozen to the spot. Ripples of energy flashed across his body, a look of terrible fear on his face. The Ferutu had immobilized him, and now they were about to kill him. About to kill the entire point of Clarence's mission. One target eliminated, the Ferutu turned on Palma.

‘You are of no use to us,’ the Ferutu said coldly, aiming a crackling finger at her. White-hot energy began to form around his hand. ‘You will annoy us no more.’

‘No!’ the angel bellowed, as he leapt forward.

Chris shouted to Clarence to stop as he saw the angel jump over Sevic, breaking the energy connection between the Vremnyan and the Ferutu. The angel rolled, and landed on his feet between the Ferutu and Palma, catching the full strength of the Ferutu’s blast. The energy ripples now covered Clarence’s body, the angel falling to his knees in pain.

Chris ran over to the Ferutu, repeatedly firing his gun straight at the creature, but the weapon had no effect.

The Ferutu caught sight of Chris and threw out a bolt of energy that knocked him to the ground.

Chris watched as a look of pure anger flashed across Clarence’s face. He had never seen him like this, suddenly aware of his importance in the universe, fighting against the tide. What was going through the angel’s head? he wondered.

Clarence had always been passive, but he suddenly felt aware of just how much difference he could make. He could live for ever if he wanted, not doing anything significant. He could travel the stars, keep his distance from the few things that could harm him. But that wasn’t what he wanted. It wasn’t what Benny, or Chris, or even Jason would do. They would do what Clarence was doing now: they would risk all for the greater good. He was risking his life for that unpleasant wretch Sevic, a man he knew probably deserved far worse than what the Ferutu were trying to do to him, but that didn’t matter - his survival would provide a chance for peace for a whole world. And then there was Palma, a young girl who had never had a chance to really live. Clarence had always wanted a normal human life, but as the pain racked his body he realized that he probably never could. He wasn’t human. Palma was, and she deserved the chance to live out her life.

Clarence had to do everything in his power to make sure she got that chance.

‘Get out of here!’ he screamed at Sevic and Palma, unable even to see them. The pain was blinding him. ‘Go!’

Content in his decision, Clarence stood fast in the face of the all-consuming pain. He allowed the light to blind him, swallowing him whole in its fury.

Chris watched Palma and Sevic run under Clarence’s instruction, the girl’s eyes filled with tears, and disappear into the *Revelation*. They were safe. Now all Chris had to do was rescue his friend.

Chris ran towards Clarence, energy flying in all directions from the gathered Ferutu, who were closing in on the *Revelation*. Plants were growing and shrinking at an alarming rate, and the ground was shifting as if the very nature of the universe were dictated by the Ferutu.

Chris felt a burning sensation as lightning smacked into his back. But he kept going. Again, he was hit. And again, but somehow he managed to get up. Chris guessed that the energy was just designed to knock a person unconscious, but somehow he was able to avoid this side effect. He was in agony, but he had to get to Clarence. He had to save his friend. In the past Chris had been part of an operation that had ruined millions of lives. If he was ever going to forgive himself, he knew he would now have to *save* millions, whatever the cost.

The Ferutu who held Clarence in his grasp lifted his hands and a cloud of green smoke began to gather between the alien and the angel. He was joined by his fellows, who ignored the *Revelation* in favour of joining their colleague’s attack on Clarence.

‘Now,’ the lead Ferutu screamed, as the aliens raised then hands as one. ‘We will force you out of existence. You will never have existed.’

The cloud enveloped Clarence, and the angel screamed. Small red lights covered Clarence’s face like leeches, and bit by bit his skin started to fall away.

Another bolt of energy hit Chris, but this time it caught his leg, sending him spinning to the ground. He was horrified to find that he could hardly move his leg. He was almost immobilized. He knew that he wouldn't have enough time to get to Clarence or get away from the pursuing Ferutu. A strange glow filled the air between Clarence and his assailants, and he realized what was going on. They were physically willing time to run backwards, pushing Clarence's personal timeline into the past.

He watched helplessly as Clarence appeared to grow, appeared to get bigger and bigger, but Chris soon realized that the larger Clarence became, the less coherent he was. He was like a ghost, and Chris could see right through him. His molecules were being ripped apart. Gradually, the familiar shape of the angel disappeared, replaced by a sea of binary digits. The Ferutu were regressing Clarence back through time. The code re-formed into a shape that Chris also recognized. It was the form of a warship, a warship that had once been known as *!CMel*. It was Clarence, in a far less pleasant form. That sort of change couldn't be stable, whatever the Ferutu might think. Chris began to drag himself across the ground, desperate to get away before the energies the Ferutu were dabbling with backfired on them.

He looked over his shoulder. The Ferutu were captivated by the spectacle before them. All attention seemed to have shifted from him to the former angel. It was as if they were curious to see what he would regress into next.

'Stop!' screamed Chris. 'Let him go! You'll only destroy

But his words were useless, drowned out by the sound of a People warship trying to form out of thin air, Clarence's body twisted into a past version that could never exist again. Chris forced himself to keep moving away, pain ripping through his body. He couldn't walk, but he could drag himself along. A roar filled the air as the shape of the warship began to break up, and Chris ducked his head down as an enormous explosion tore over him.

‘Clarence!’ Benny screamed as she saw his obliteration on the viewscreen. The poor thing. He had been so brave, and it was partly her fault. Clarence had liked Jason and Chris, but Benny knew that he hung around them only to see her. She felt guilty that it was because of her that he had come on this mission.

She watched in horror. Chris disappeared beneath the rolling wave of flame as the Ferutu were consumed by the blast. Was he gone as well? She waited a few moments for the smoke to clear. Clarence and the Ferutu were gone, but Chris was still lying on the ground, unmoving.

Benny decided that she had to risk going out there. First Heldov, now Clarence... She was going to do her best to stop anyone else from dying. Chris could already be dead. But she couldn’t leave without finding out.

It had taken ages for her to work out how the *Revelation’s* weapons systems had worked - the ship was designed to drop them off and pick them up, so they had been given no training in operating its defences. Eventually she had managed to start picking off the Ferutu, one by one, but she was unable to fire on the aliens holding Clarence as he was too near the ship. It was like playing a video game where her friends were the characters. It had all been going so well, but the Ferutu had been moving faster than she could fire. They were distorting time and space, and she knew that it would only be moments before they destroyed her weapons. Chris was out there, defenceless, unable to move. She couldn’t just stay in the ship and blast him out of trouble. She would have to go and get him.

Benny set the weapons to autofire and ran over to the side of the cockpit where a weapons rack lay waiting. She looked for a weapon, but all she could find was a large metal spanner. What the hell, she thought. It’s better than nothing. So she scooped it up in one hand. She ran to the entrance hatch, passing the man she had seen with Clarence, the infamous Sevic, along the way, as well as a rather distraught girl Benny had never seen before. Not having time for niceties, she ignored them. Chris was all that mattered.

Chris rolled on to his back and blinked, his eyes smoke-stung.

'Bastards!' he shouted, unable to see if the Ferutu were near him or not. 'You've... you've killed him!'

Chris felt anger flood through his veins. He had become used to death. Become used to the sacrifices people had to make. But now he was starting to regret his callousness, and the Ferutu's heartless murder of Clarence was enough to send him over the edge.

He felt a whoosh of air as something appeared beside him. He blinked, and could just make out the figure of a Ferutu standing over him.

'Your dead friend took many of our number with him,' snarled the Ferutu. 'You will have to pay for this atrocity.'

'Come and get me, you sick bastard,' shouted Chris, trying to drag himself to his feet. He flung his injured body forward, close enough to grab the Ferutu's robes. He pulled the alien to the floor and began punching him in the chest.

Chris pounded the Ferutu with all his energy, but the Ferutu just laughed. The creature was shielded from every kick and blocked every punch. There was nothing Chris could do.

'It's over,' shouted the Ferutu. 'You've lost.'

Chris was thrown backwards in a gust of cold air. He looked up to see that the Ferutu was concentrating on him silver ripples of pure time energy that were arcing towards him.

'And now you will die!' the Ferutu exclaimed. 'You will die before you were born, and we will have our revenge for your crimes against our universe. You will die like your friend, but without the rather disturbing side effects. You are a mortal, and you will die like a mortal.' The corners of the Ferutu's mouth turned up. The alien was loving every minute of this.

Chris felt his skin burn, rippling and distorting as the Ferutu's powers did their work. Scenes from the past floated through his memory as the creature pushed him back

through his personal timeline, but Chris tried to ignore them. It took only a few moments for him to lose consciousness, and he drowned beneath the torrent of his own history.

Benny ran across the desert, and saw the creature torturing Chris, consuming him in a raging silver fire. At first she thought he was shrinking, but then she realized he was just getting younger. She raised the spanner and brought it down hard on the alien's skull.

'Low technology,' she muttered as the creature keeled over. 'Gets these smug bastards every time.'

The alien already appeared to be standing up, so Benny ran over to Chris and pulled him to his feet before the creature could manage another attack. Chris was a child, little more than thirteen years old. A mop of blond hair covered his head, and he looked like a scarecrow in his far-too-big clothes. He looked strange, like this. Innocent, reborn.

Trying to forget about the strangeness of the transformation, she dragged this new Chris into the ship, and slammed the hatch shut. As she did so, she felt one of the aliens reach out and touch her mind.

Suddenly everything was dark, and she found herself in silence. The only other thing she could see was one of the aliens.

'Welcome, Bernice Summerfield,' said the alien.

'Where am I?' Benny asked. 'What's happening?'

'We are between time, in the space between seconds. We have been impressed by your friends' resilience, but something has troubled us about them. Why would they make such a sacrifice for a planet they didn't even come from? And then we saw you, and everything fell into place. Your ship is capable of taking a party back to your universe. We will take your ship and use it to colonize your universe, but this time the trip will ensure that the entire Ferutu race will be saved, rather than a few scientists.'

'Wait a minute,' said Benny. 'You're trying to tell me that you're going to take the *Revelation*, and use it to invade my universe? I don't think so, sunshine.'

The alien, the Ferutu, smiled. 'Oh, you'll let us take the ship. Look...'

The Ferutu waved a hand and a cloud of coloured gas appeared from it. The gas drifted apart to reveal a window on another place.

'Jason!' Benny shouted, as she stared at the image of her husband lying battered and bruised on a cold stone floor. 'What have you done to him?'

'He's our prisoner,' the Ferutu said. 'As you will be. I see from your head that the transference technology works via a certain control node. Give the node to me, and your husband lives. Refuse -' the image of Jason screamed, as a Ferutu jabbed a poker into his side '- and he will belong to us for ever as our prisoner. He too will know what it's like when our universe ends.'

'No,' Benny shouted. 'You can't make me do this. You can't force me to choose. Not again.'

For the greater good, Benny. The greater good. Long ago, the thought of letting one person die to save millions had abhorred her. But she had changed now, and realized that the more important a person became, the more responsibility they had to do what was right. She had already sent the remaining Dellahans into this universe without their consent.

Sure, they would be free from the gods, and would live for a few years yet before the universe ended, but she was still condemning them to an unpleasant fate. If she agreed to the Ferutu's wishes, the Dellahans' sacrifice would be worthless. Jason was just another person in that position. She had already jeopardized the universe once because of him, and, although she had managed to have her cake on that occasion, it was clear that this time the universe wasn't going to let her off that lightly.

'Fetch us the node,' the Ferutu said, before fading away.

Benny's vision cleared and she found herself back in the *Revelation*. She looked down at Chris and realized she would have to help him later. She had to get to the cockpit.

It seemed to take forever to get to the front of the ship, but as soon as she was in the pilot's seat Benny flicked the switch to open the hatch where the transference node was.

She flicked more switches and the *Revelation* took off, into the air. Maybe she could escape. Maybe she could find Jason herself.

There was a crash and the ship was suddenly motionless. Benny looked at the viewscreen and saw that a giant tree root had grown around the ship, ensnaring it. The Ferutu must have dropped a time-distortion bubble on them. They were stuck, and there was only one way out. She had to get the node away from the Ferutu. She had to save the universe.

'Goodbye, Jason,' she said, tears streaming down her face. 'One day, I'll come back for you. I promise.'

She wanted to stop herself. Wanted to turn around and give the bloody node to the Ferutu if it meant Jason would be freed, but...

She closed her eyes and slammed her fist down on the transference-activation button. The ship rippled and fizzled as it was sucked out of time, away from the grasp of the Ferutu. As the ship disappeared, Benny looked at the viewscreen and took one last look at Dellah. As she did so, she prayed that Jason would forgive her.

* * *

In a dark prison cell, far away from the *Revelation*, Jason Kane screamed.

'What do you want from me?' he asked into the darkness, but, as with every other time he had asked that question in the hours since he got here, there was no response. Jason struggled against the ropes that held down his arms and legs but was unable to move. Sweat dripped out of his every pore as he struggled to escape, but his efforts were futile. He wasn't going anywhere. He could remember little of what had happened after the first conversation with one of the aliens, but he knew that they were far from friendly. They had stripped away all his possessions and thrown him into a cell like a discarded piece of litter. After several hours in the

darkness, the paralysing drugs in his system had worn off and they had tied him to the rack, where he currently lay.

A light flicked on, a light that seemed so pure and ethereal that it was as if a distant star were barely metres away from Jason's face.

A figure stepped out of the darkness, and, although Jason could not see his face, the robes told him that this was one of the aliens.

'What's happening?' Jason whimpered. 'What's going on?'

The alien took a deep breath before speaking. 'A great crime has been committed,' she said. So, Jason thought, there are women aliens in this place. 'Your group has brought the planet known as Dellah into our space, and now we are forced to adopt it into our universe. We could have destroyed it, but we see potential for yet another Utopian world here. We will look after and protect those on the planet until the end of time.'

'Look,' sighed Jason, 'this is great, but can't you let me out of here?'

The alien shook her head. 'This is the price, you see. The Dellahans are useless to us, mere playthings, but you and your three friends were different. You have certain knowledge, certain experiences, certain abilities that could prove quite useful to us. We must find a way to save our universe, and you might provide the key. We spare the Dellahans, in exchange for you.'

Jason realized what the alien was saying. He thought back to the icy wastes, and the caravan through the snow. The villagers he had assumed would die would now be fine, but the price was a life in prison at the hands of these aliens.

'But what about the others?' Jason asked. 'What about Benny and Clarence and Chris?'

'Dead,' the alien sighed, like a doctor who had just failed to save a patient's life. 'I'm sorry,' she said, her eyes carrying a look that was either pity or sympathy. 'A temporal explosion eliminated them all from existence. It was simply justice.'

‘No,’ said Jason, blood-soaked tears welling up in his eyes. ‘That can’t be true. You’re lying.’

The alien shook her head. ‘They’re all dead, apart from you. And one day we hope to use you to let us recreate the actions of the ones you called “the gods” on a level that will let us all migrate into your universe. The conversion of your universe into one like ours will begin, as will extensive colonization. You, Jason Kane, will be the saviour of our universe.’

Jason closed his eyes and screamed. He had to get back to his universe without the aliens following him. The aliens were clearly unable to jump between realities, but people from his universe had been able to shift an entire planet across. Perhaps there was still hope. He had to get out of this nightmare and find out. He had to find out whether the alien was lying about Benny’s death.

‘I’ve got to get out of here,’ he said through gritted teeth. ‘I’ve got to get out.’

With the help of Terin Sevic, an uneasy peace came to Vremnya. Sporadic fighting broke out here and there, but generally the new treaty was adhered to. As summer settled into the cooler days of early autumn, stability of a kind began to establish itself. Intergalactic peacekeepers patrolled the streets and resolved conflicts, while other sources provided funding for the rebuilding of society. A coalition of the rich and generous, among them one Irving Braxiatel, decided to fund a university, to try to bring culture, learning and understanding to the war-stricken people of Vremnya.

With a degree of nepotism, Braxiatel found a job for an old friend.

The great Cathedral of Vremnya pierced the sky like an arrowhead, a sandstone direction marker pointing the way to heaven. In the shadow of the cathedral was the square, a mass of mosaic tiles telling the history of several of Vremnya's kings, three hundred years of history from over a millennium ago. Recent conflicts had caused damage; gas attacks had faded some of the colours with their corrosive effects; a shell had blasted a hole in, ironically, the middle of a battle scene. Across one series of images, portraying the martyrdom of one of the early patriarchs, sat a pavement café. And at one of the tables sat Professor Bernice Summerfield, former holder of the Edward Watkinson Chair at St Oscar's University on Dellah, now head of the Archaeology Department at the University of Vremnya.

Benny sat with her coffee, nervously drumming her fingers on the metal table. An elderly woman on an adjacent table gave her an evil glare, so she stopped tapping and put her

hands on the table, squeezing her knees together. She was on the interviewing panel for the university, and would be partially responsible for the success or otherwise of countless academic careers. Who they decided to recruit would also affect the whole atmosphere of the place: would it be an oppositional environment, or a communal one? Bizarrely, in spite of her having held the fate of the galaxy in her hands so recently, this responsibility felt much more real to her. Gods and monsters were one thing, and she had seen enough of both, but pay cheques, CVs, the whole nine-to-five thing? It was what life was supposed to be about, wasn't it? Real stuff, real people. It was slightly scary, all this normality.

But then, Vremnya wasn't one hundred per cent normal anyway. The legacy of the war raged on, with occasional outbreaks of violence, and a society built upon the gangsterism of the black economy. Besides, old tensions died hard, and there were still plenty of issues unresolved. But at least they were people problems, rather than the cosmic lunacy of late. Benny had a funny feeling she might finally have got herself a life. Now, if she could just manage a whole year where she didn't have to avert a major disaster, or stop an alien invasion, or deal with some similar absurdity...

'Two cappuccinos,' said Braxiatel, interrupting her line of thought. He slid the coffee across to her. 'So, how are you settling in?' He had just returned from a few weeks on KS-159, tending to his gardens.

'Perfect,' said Benny. 'It has its problems, but where doesn't?' She leant over to him conspiratorially. 'You know, if I find out you set this entire university up just because I couldn't find a job on my own, I'll be very annoyed.'

'In spite of your recent activities, Benny, you'll find that the galaxy doesn't *entirely* revolve around you,' Braxiatel replied tartly.

They fell briefly silent, pausing to watch a mother try to feed her baby at the next table.

'You know,' Benny said. 'I had a dream, what you might call a vision if you're the superstitious type, which I'm not. I saw myself in the future, pregnant with Jason's child. I know

he's in a totally different universe, but I can't stop feeling that vision's going to come true someday. But that's me all over. A romantic who's always being proven wrong.'

Braxiatel shrugged. 'Maybe your vision *is* correct. As I've told you a dozen times before, we will go back and try to find Jason. He's seen too much high technology, too much stuff which the Ferutu could rip out of his mind. We need to bring him back. It's just a matter of waiting for the right moment. Trust me.'

Benny reached over and squeezed Braxiatel's hand. 'I do, and I know you'll do your best.' She choked up slightly, and decided to change the subject. 'So, how are things on the cosmic scale?'

'As well as can be expected,' said Braxiatel. 'With my former people in their little bottle, and the People locked in their sphere... it shouldn't be a problem. With the gods gone, they have no interest in human space any more. Besides, I suggested that they might end up stranded in the same universe as the Ferutu if they didn't behave, and they didn't like the sound of that. No, we have this playground to ourselves for now.'

'And what do they think about this Ferutu business?' asked Benny. 'Aren't they worried they might have another invasion on their hands?'

Braxiatel smiled wryly. 'I thought it best not to worry their pretty little heads about such trivial matters. We can deal with the Ferutu problem ourselves, if it ever arises. Besides, the figures the *Revelation* brought back from that other universe should help us neutralize any attempts to establish a new pantheon of gods. If they do come, they're going to have to come as themselves rather than as deities. We can deal with it.'

'Oh,' said Benny with mock, arrogance. 'What *can't* we deal with?'

'Sorry I'm late,' said Chris, dropping into a seat between Benny and Braxiatel. 'I got stopped at a checkpoint, and it took me ages to explain that, yes, I was old enough to drive a

skimmer.’ He sounded more than a little annoyed by the whole experience.

‘Well, you do still look very young,’ said Benny. ‘We could get you a bicycle, if you like. Maybe even a BMX, if you’re lucky.’

Chris smacked the table with his hand. ‘Don’t push it, OK? This isn’t funny!’

‘Sorry,’ said Benny, smirking inwardly at his adolescent tantrum. ‘But look on the bright side: at least you’re not fat any more. If anything you’re positively scrawny.’

‘Yeah,’ he moaned, sinking back into his chair like the sulky teenager he resembled. ‘I suppose it is the best way to lose weight imaginable. It’s just... being brought up in the Overcity I couldn’t go anywhere on my own anyway – it wouldn’t have been safe. Being seen as a child in a big place like this, I can’t actually do any kind of proper job, or anything I used to take for granted.’

‘We could get you a paper round,’ muttered Benny. Chris looked at her sullenly, then disappeared to grab a coffee from the counter.

‘So, what can you tell me about his condition?’ Benny whispered to Braxiatel while Chris was out of earshot.

‘It might wear off,’ said Braxiatel. ‘He could go back to how he was recently, how he was before he met you, or he might even suffer a form of temporal strain where he ages to sixty overnight. Time will tell.’

They jumped back and tried to look relaxed as Chris returned to the table, glancing suspiciously between them.

‘So, how is life as a free agent?’ asked Benny. ‘Now your people have sodded off for good.’

‘Well, I’m happy for them to stay as far away as possible,’ said Chris, dropping three sugar cubes into his coffee. ‘Even if they were around, I don’t think I would risk dealing with them again. The Ferutu restored the memories my employers altered and... I don’t think I can trust them any more, you know?’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Benny. ‘I’m not unfamiliar with memory loss myself, and it all comes back far clearer than the cynics

would have you believe. I know I'm me, you know you're you, and that's all that matters. Anyone who thinks otherwise can just go to hell, OK?'

'OK,' agreed Chris with a shy, boyish smile. 'Heaven or hell, provided it isn't here.'

'Heaven?' echoed Benny. 'I once went to Heaven. Not the one in the Bible - I've had enough of gods recently. No, it was a planet. Quite a nice one in fact. This was way back, before I knew either of you. I wasn't even a real professor then, just a young archaeologist with a fake qualification. I always dreamt of a job like this, a place like this. This is exactly where I would have wanted to find myself, you know? A proper academic, a nice university in a historic city. Who would have thought I would have ended up here, that I would fulfil that dream? That I'd even survive, unlike all those others we've known.' She paused. 'Clarence.'

'Roz,' added Chris quietly.

Braxiatel didn't say anything. He wasn't the confessional type.

'We're lucky, you know, to still be around after all these years,' said Benny. 'We owe it to those we've lost to keep on living, and not look back too much. A toast.' She raised her coffee cup.

Chris smiled sadly, and raised his cup. 'To old friends.'

'And to the future,' added Braxiatel. They clicked their cups together, then drank up in silence. Benny looked at her watch.

'Better be getting back to work,' she said, standing up. 'The candidates will be there soon, and I don't want them catching me off guard.'

'Just hire the ones who remind you of the Benny who went to Heaven,' advised Braxiatel. 'That way you'll know you're recruiting the best possible people.'

Benny grinned bashfully at the compliment.

'Whatever you say,' she said. 'See you two around.'

The university was based in a string of ageing redbrick town houses a few minutes' walk from the cathedral. Before the

war they had been offices for various small businesses, all of which had gone bust due to the conflict. Braxiatel had bought the whole street from the City Council, providing funds that they had gratefully poured into rebuilding the more war-torn parts of the capital. The buildings were in a state of relative disrepair, and resources were tight. The structure was sound enough, but the floorboards creaked, the roof leaked, and there weren't any elevators. Benny cursed this last point bitterly as she climbed the four flights of stairs to her office.

As she passed the main office on her way up, Emile stuck his head out of the door. Braxiatel had put him in charge of organizing the initial stages of setting up the university, and basically protecting his investment.

'The candidates are waiting in the third-floor lecture theatre,' Emile told her. 'There's about sixty of them; not a bad turnout for only seven jobs. Palma's just collecting their forms now.'

'Great,' replied Benny. 'I get to doom ninety per cent of them to unemployment.'

'They'll live,' said Emile, beaming. 'And so will you. Break a leg.'

'On these stairs, it's entirely possible,' she replied.

After losing everything she owned when the gods devastated Dellah, Benny had been forced to live a life without clutter. The result was the tidiest academic's office in the whole of history. It was a good office, too, although Benny had dark suspicions about Marjorie, who occupied the office down the corridor. The decor was sparse, slightly battered, but rather charming. A selection of choice first-edition archaeology textbooks, purchased by Braxiatel as a moving-in gift, lined the shelves. Emile had presented her with a gaudily framed antique mirror to hang on one wall. Another friend had given her a desk-tidy in the shape of an archaic phone box, from which sprouted a selection of biros. Then there were the impersonal items which any office had: comsystem, computer, and so on. Benny checked her messages on the

comsystem, and found nothing but an offer to buy double glazing, a reminder that her cat Wolsey was due for his yearly vaccinations, and a garbled message from someone she'd never heard of. Someone called Christine.

Messages dealt with, Benny reorganized the papers she needed for conducting the interviews, her sheaf of employment details. She was almost ready.

Benny sat at her desk, in her slope-roofed office up the rickety staircase, and looked out of the window at the blue skies. Small purple birds were nesting in the eaves of the building opposite, and their songs carried across the street.

As she listened to the birdsong, her eyes drifted to the photo of Jason on her desk. He was out there, somewhere, and she wanted to be with him. She was *determined* to be with him, for good this time, no half-hearted measures, no separations or unnecessary difficulties. Compared with making that commitment, the matter of going to another universe to rescue him seemed a relatively minor obstacle. In the meantime, she had business to deal with.

Benny stood up and walked over to the mirror. She looked intensely at her reflection, psyching herself up for the interviews ahead. It was a good world out there, in spite of all the problems, and it needed people like her, places like the university, to help it heal. She looked at herself. The temporal blast that had hit her back on Dellah had rejuvenated her a little, and a lot of the wrinkles on her face, as well as all the grey in her hair, had gone. She must have lost half a decade's worth of the effects of ageing. She had the rest of her life ahead of her, plus a few extra years thanks to the Ferutu.

She smiled at herself in the mirror. She still had plenty of life to live, lots of new people to meet, numerous new adventures still ahead of her.

Bernice Summerfield walked out of the door. Her story was far from over.

THE PUBLISHER'S AFTERWORD

This could be the last NA book for some time, and I thought it only fair to let you know.

The first New Adventure appeared in 1991. In those days the books were original novels which featured the characters from the BBC's long-running television series *Doctor Who*; the stories continued the adventures of the Doctor and his companion, Ace, from the point where they were left at the end of *Survival*, the last to be broadcast of the seventh Doctor's TV stories.

Bernice Summerfield made her first appearance in only the ninth New Adventure, Paul Cornell's *Love and War*, published in 1992. Increasingly the stories began to revolve around her; other new characters, such as Chris Cwej, Kadiatu, Roz Forrester, Clarence and Emile, were introduced by other authors.

When in 1997 the BBC declined to renew the licence under which the New Adventures were published as Doctor Who Novels, it was easy to continue the series without the Doctor and his TARDIS. Bernice took centre stage, the covers were redesigned to remove any lingering Gallifreyan associations, and the NA imprint was born.

The New Adventures constitute, I think, the longest-running science-fiction saga in book form - certainly the longest still in print. It's an achievement I'm proud of, but I can't take the credit. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all the authors who have written for the series; you're too numerous to mention by name, but one of the joys of publishing the New Adventures was that it gave me the chance to provide opportunities to new writers. It gives me enormous satisfaction to know that many of the authors whose first published works were New Adventure stories have gone on to carve out careers as SF authors and in television.

Thanks also to the editors who have worked with me on the New Adventures over the years: Riona MacNamara in the early days; Rebecca Levene, whose contribution to the development of the series cannot be overestimated; Andy Bodle; and Simon Winstone, who took over the NA imprint when Rebecca finally succumbed to the siren call of television work. All of these people have now moved on, and the New Adventures have returned to their point of origin: to me.

And, as I write this in July 1999, I'm about to part company with Virgin Publishing, the parent company of the NA imprint. This book, therefore, is almost certainly the last in the NA series that I'll publish.

As for the future of the New Adventures - well, it's in the lap of the gods.

Final and most heartfelt thanks to you: the readers who have stayed with the New Adventures over the years, and have come to know and love the characters. *Ave atque vale!*

Peter Darvill-Evans
Publisher
July 1999